

The death of Yevgeny Prigozhin and US war propaganda

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On August 23, the billionaire Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin died in a crash of his private jet under unexplained circumstances. The crash also killed a significant section of the senior leadership of the Wagner Group, the Russian private military contractor which Prigozhin headed, including its military commander, Dmitry Utkin.

Prigozhin's airplane was leaving Moscow for St. Petersburg and had been underway for 30 minutes when it experienced a catastrophic failure resembling an explosion, causing the aircraft to plummet from the sky.

Formed in 2014, the Wagner Group has played a major role in Russian military and diplomatic operations, providing not only fighters for the wars in Syria and Ukraine, but also private military services for governments throughout Africa and the Middle East. Prigozhin and Wagner led the successful Russian effort to capture the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, known in Russian as Artyomovsk, in May.

Two months before the crash, Prigozhin, previously a long-time ally of Vladimir Putin, carried out a coup attempt with his Wagner forces, marching from Ukraine and occupying the city of Rostov-on-Don before wheeling toward Moscow and demanding the dismissal of the army leadership. Prigozhin's coup attempt was the most open expression so far of ongoing, intense infighting within the Russian state apparatus and ruling class.

To start with the obvious, no one knows at this point why the plane crashed or who was responsible. There are as many possibilities as one would find in an Agatha Christie novel. Even the cause of the crash has not been established. However, given who Prigozhin was, it is reasonable to weigh one's assumptions toward the conclusion that this was not an accident.

Assuming that the crash was the product of deliberate action, this then raises the more complex question of who was responsible. The US media and government immediately rushed to proclaim that Prigozhin was assassinated by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Following a tried and true method, an anonymous UK government official told the *Wall Street Journal* that the "most likely

suspect" was the Russian government. Other major newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, proclaimed this supposition as an established fact.

US President Joe Biden declared that he was "not surprised" at the death of Prigozhin, adding, "There's not much in Russia that Putin doesn't have a hand in."

Of course, this is not a possibility that can be discounted out of hand. It cannot be excluded that the crash that killed Prigozhin is the aftershock of what occurred in the attempted coup exactly two months ago.

But the question must be asked, if Putin sought to eliminate Prigozhin, why would he do it in this way?

While publicly denouncing the leaders of the coup as traitors, Putin engineered a rapprochement with Prigozhin, dropping criminal charges and appearing alongside him at public diplomatic functions.

Why kill him with a bomb on a plane, along with 10 other individuals, rather than simply arrest and prosecute him? If Putin was so concerned about the possibility of a second coup, why did he allow Prigozhin to move about freely between Moscow and St. Petersburg, and even leave the country and direct his forces in Africa, where they aided in the military coup in Niger?

Even considering the possibility that a Russian actor was involved, Putin would hardly be the only suspect. Prigozhin had many enemies, both in the regular military, whose leadership he had targeted in the coup attempt, and among the Russian billionaire oligarchs.

But if one asks the question, "Who benefits?" there are many non-Russian suspects, from Ukraine to the United States, or even France and Britain. Over the past several years, the Wagner Group's operations in both Ukraine and Africa have seriously undermined the geopolitical interests of the imperialist powers.

This would help to explain Ukrainian President Zelensky's cryptic remark to journalists, "When Ukraine asked the people of the world for help with airplanes, this isn't what we had in mind."

While universally proclaiming that Putin was responsible for the death of Prigozhin, leading figures in the US foreign policy establishment and media welcomed the consequences that the assassination would have. In a column responding to the death of Prigozhin, Alexander Vindman, a former National Security Council official and leading US war propagandist, declared that the assassination could “speed peace in Ukraine.” The “elimination of Wagner,” Vindman wrote, “weakens the nationalist wing pushing for a more aggressive war—and may ease pressure on Putin for a continued, expanded war.”

“In fact, the demise of the warlord is very good news for Ukraine,” writes Maksym Skrypchenko, president of the Transatlantic Dialogue Center, a pro-NATO Ukrainian think tank. “The death of Prigozhin, alongside Wagner group’s infamous first commander Dmitry Utkin, will likely provide Ukrainian forces with a battlefield advantage for months to come.”

“With Prigozhin out of the picture, Russian public opinion could also turn against Putin,” he added hopefully. “If we are reading the signs right, the mysterious plane crash that eliminated Russia’s mercenary boss may someday be remembered as the climax of the elaborate tragedy that is Putin’s Ukraine invasion.”

US media commentators likewise pointed to the significant role of Wagner in Russian military and diplomatic relations. “The Wagner group was the forward operation arm of the Kremlin, military and political, in Africa,” said NBC correspondent Richard Engel. “I saw it myself in the Central African Republic, the embassy there was Wagner, it was Wagner that was on patrol in the street. I asked the governor about it, I asked the president, ‘you said we needed protection, we wanted Russian security protection, and they sent Wagner.’”

Noting that Prigozhin had spent his final days traveling to African countries, where he “had helped turn the mercenary group into one of Russia’s most powerful and recognizable assets on the continent,” the *Times* wrote that “in the span of a few years, Wagner became a security partner for some autocratic governments in Africa, upending power balances in already fragile regions and gaining its own political influence in the process... Wagner’s forces helped strengthen embattled governments and warlords in countries including the Central African Republic, Mali, Libya and Sudan.”

In other words, the presence of Wagner in Ukraine, but even more so in Africa, was a serious obstacle to the military and geopolitical aims of the imperialist powers in these regions.

Another point: In an article headlined “The Godfather in the Kremlin,” the *Wall Street Journal* declares that the assassination “highlights the evolution of Russia into a

mafia state.” The question must be asked, however, if the assassination of leading political figures makes Russia a “mafia state,” what does that make the United States? Or Ukraine?

Prigozhin’s death follows a series of assassinations targeting leading pro-war figures inside Russia carried out by Ukrainian forces, including Daria Dugina last August and Russian military blogger Vladlen Tatarsky in April. After Dugina’s killing, the *New York Times* was quick to claim that “there was no evidence that the attack was connected to the war in Ukraine.” Yet only two months later, in October, the *Times* reported, the “U.S. believes Ukrainians were behind an assassination in Russia.”

Just three days before the assassination of Dugina, *Times* correspondent Andrew Kramer published an article praising pro-Ukraine assassination squads operating inside Russia, in an article entitled, “Behind Enemy Lines, Ukrainians Tell Russians ‘You Are Never Safe.’”

Following a drone attack on the Kremlin earlier this year, Secretary of State Antony Blinken was asked about the United States position on an alleged effort to “assassinate President Vladimir Putin.” Blinken declared, “These are decisions for Ukraine to make about how it’s going to defend itself.”

Earlier this year, a trove of leaked Pentagon documents revealed the immense concern of Pentagon strategists over Wagner’s growing influence in Africa, listing a dozen potential “coordinated US and allied disruption efforts” against Wagner, including “kinetic” options involving the assassination of its leadership.

None of these realities are discussed in the media coverage of Prigozhin’s death, which is driven largely by the propaganda needs of the US government. Facing growing popular opposition to a disastrous war, the US media seeks to do everything possible to demonize Russia and the Putin government.

But words have consequences. This concerted propaganda effort has a logic of its own, becoming itself a factor in the escalation of the war.



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