

Did Yevgeny Prigozhin Really Lead an Armed Rebellion in Russia?

Or was it possibly something quite different?

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"A riddle wrapped up in an enigma" is a shortened form of a quotation made in October 1939, just one month after the Second World War had begun, by Sir Winston Churchill in a radio broadcast to the British people. At the time, Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty. The full comment was "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma..." Somehow that statement popped up into my head as I tried to decipher the meaning of the Yevgeny Prigozhin alleged coup attempt in Russia on Saturday June 24th, an unanticipated development that has energized the imaginations of pundits and government officials worldwide, generating a torrent of written articles as well as many hours' worth of spoken commentary.

Predictably, the blather coming out of US Government officials like Secretary of State Antony Blinken is worthless propaganda-speak, replaying the standard line about evil Russia and the autocrat Vladimir Putin, who, per Blinken, is in serious trouble in a Russia that is in chaos over the continuing Ukraine war, which, he claims, the Kremlin is losing.

President Joe Biden also played his part in distancing the US from the Prigozhin affair by declaring emphatically that the US government was not behind the alleged coup attempt, though he also ladled it on thick last Wednesday by [declaring, like Blinken, that](#) Russia was losing the war in Ukraine and Putin has become "a bit of a pariah around the world." Both those assertions could easily be challenged.

There was almost no bloodshed in the initial move by Wagner Group mercenary units to Rostov on Don, which houses the Army's Southern Command. Afterwards, while on the road to Moscow, there was no resistance from regular army troops along the way, though there are reports that several Russian army helicopters and a surveillance aircraft shadowing the column were shot down. But surely beyond that something potentially game changing vis-à-vis Russia-Ukraine came close to happening even if we do not yet know with any certitude

why or even how it all occurred. The central problem is that there are many explanations of what took place that are plausible but which cannot be confirmed based on the fact that no one directly involved in the event's genesis or execution is likely to provide any honest answers to questions that might logically be raised.

Consider for a moment some of the elements in the drama. As it was occurring, Putin initially went on television to denounce the apparent march on Moscow by the Wagner group soldiers as an attempted *coup d'état* which made participants traitors to the Russian government. Prigozhin, however, quickly rejected that characterization, claiming that he was making his move to confront the generals in Moscow who were failing in their duty to win the war against Kiev as expeditiously as possible, i.e. possibly because they were dragging their heels by avoiding any risk and making a war that could have been concluded seem interminable and possibly even unwinnable.

The march on Moscow should thus be seen as an "demonstration of dissent" according to Prigozhin. And to thicken the plot even further, two senior generals Valery Gerasimov and Sergei Surovikin [have not been seen in public](#) since Saturday and there are unconfirmed reports that one of them, Surovikin, a former commander of Russian forces in Ukraine, has been arrested. Gerasimov is Army chief of staff and the current commander of forces in Ukraine while Surovikin is now serving as his deputy. The handing over of Gerasimov was one of the demands allegedly made by Prigozhin.

US intelligence sources are also now claiming that Surovikin [knew about the rebellion](#) in advance, which suggests that CIA and the Pentagon also knew about it. And there is also a comment made by Ukraine's head of defense intelligence, Major General Kyrylo Budanov, [who said](#) Kyiv knew both about Prigozhin's plans and a separate plot by Russia's intelligence agency the FSB to assassinate him. If any or all of that is true, that rather suggests that there might have been a real foreign intelligence agency driven plot against Putin or at least that the Kremlin is proceeding with caution to include the generals' accounts of their activities being verified to make sure they were not complicit in any way with either the CIA or the Ukrainian government or Prigozhin himself.

So one has to ask whether Putin's advisers and his intelligence resources were accurately portraying what Prigozhin was up to or was the speech about "treason" a cover story designed to hide a more complicated sequence of events. Did, for example, Putin's intel chiefs really know in advance that the "coup" or what is possibly better described as an "armed protest" would be taking place? If that is so, did they let it start, assuming that it could not succeed, to attempt to rally the Russian people behind the government and the war? And an even deeper, darker possibility is that the entire episode was contrived by Prigozhin and Putin in support of some still undetermined agenda.

Prigozhin's subsequent exile to Belarus in exchange for his ending the insurrection and the dropping of any-and-all charges against the alleged Wagner Group insurgents rather suggests that the business of what it was all about was not as straightforward as it seemed on day one. Whilst denouncing the "mutiny plotters" Putin carefully distinguished between those individuals and "the majority of Wagner Group soldiers and commanders" who "are also Russian patriots, loyal to their people and their state." Indeed, Prigozhin's role aside, the Wagner Group was founded and commanded by former military intelligence (GRU) officers and funded and provisioned by the Ministry of Defense. Beyond that, Wagner's soldiers were heroes, the legendary victors of the "battle of Bakhmut."

And then there is the possible US role denied by Biden. The *Washington Post* [has confirmed that](#) the claim that the CIA knew about what it referred to as the “rebellion,” i.e. the plan to march on Moscow, at least several days in advance. The Agency briefed the so-called Gang of Eight in Congress regarding what was expected to occur but it has not shared what it knew with the public. That might suggest to some that the United States and quite likely Britain were behind an actual coup attempt and may have even initiated it, possibly as some kind of false flag operation, a scenario suggested by Putin in his television address where he hinted darkly that

“They [the West and Ukraine] wanted Russian soldiers to kill each other, so that soldiers and civilians would die, so that in the end Russia would lose, and our society would break apart and choke on bloody civil strife (...) They rubbed their hands, dreaming of getting revenge for their failures at the front and during the so-called counter-offensive, but they miscalculated.”

That is a pretty direct accusation of presumed guilt and it [has been suggested that](#) Prigozhin may have met secretly with Ukrainian and NATO intelligence officers in Africa where Wagner has also been operating. If that is true, he might have been recruited by CIA or MI-6, or possibly even was allowed to cooperate with them after consulting with Putin, again in support of an as-of-yet undetermined objective, though seriously embarrassing the US and NATO might have been envisioned.

And it is important to remember that Prigozhin might have had what would be best described as a personal grievance against the generals in Moscow and also against Putin. Many of the commentators on his “rebellion” ignore the important fact that he is a businessman, not a soldier.

He is an oligarch who made his billions largely by catering to the military and government and he has sometimes been referred to as “Putin’s chef.” Given that, his primary interests center on protecting his investments and assets, of which the Wagner mercenary group is one. He has been dismayed at how his manpower has been getting exploited in desultory fighting that seems to go nowhere and has been loudly complaining for months about various issues relating to the progress of the war.

Concerning Wagner, Prigozhin was about to get demoted on July 1st when Wagner was supposed to sign a contract that would place it under the *de facto* control of the Russian Ministry of Defense, with at least a third of its active strength being transferred to Belarus for garrison duty against Polish threats, though subsequent reports indicate that the soldiers have not begun to move from their existing bases in Russia and Ukraine.

Interestingly, Prigozhin, who strongly opposed and actually refused to sign the contract, was reportedly in his exile in Belarus and was not seen for many days immediately after the coup attempt, though the Kremlin [has now revealed](#) that he actually met with Putin five days after the alleged mutiny during a three hour meeting to pledge his loyalty also attended by both Wagner and regular army officers.

There have, however, been subsequent reports of [a possible brief trip](#) by Prigozhin to his hometown St. Petersburg in Russia early last week. The visit had an intriguing angle to it as Prigozhin reportedly visited the Federal Security Service (FSB) office to pick up his small arsenal of [personal weapons](#) and a large quantity of cash and gold bars, which had been confiscated when his [lavish principal residence](#) and offices in and near the city were

searched after he was detained. Multiple passports and a large number of theatrical type costumes were also obtained in the mansion together with a few sledgehammers – a tool the Wagner group allegedly used to murder defectors, [numerous pictures](#) of Prigozhin in various disguises as well as a stuffed alligator and “a framed photo which is purported to show [the severed heads](#) of [Prigozhin’s] enemies.”

In [an impromptu interview](#) last Thursday Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko told surprised reporters that Prigozhin has apparently remained in St. Petersburg in spite of brokered peace deal granting him exile status in Belarus that was guaranteed by Lukashenko himself, who opined that for all he knows Prigozhin might well be back in Moscow. There has also been some [speculation that](#) Prigozhin is back in Russia to somehow cooperate in the breakup of his business empire. If all of that is true, something very strange is going on.

Indeed, it is to be presumed that many of Prigozhin’s business interests and the Wagner Group are now being taken over by the Russian state. Indeed, one Russian Member of Parliament Andrey Kartapolov [has suggested that](#) the disputed contract was the initial principal reason for Prigozhin’s “mutiny.” There [are also claims](#) that the amnesty and changes in ownership of Prigozhin’s assets notwithstanding, there will be investigations of Wagner’s internal operations, to include its corrupt spending of Ministry of Defense money, which apparently benefited Prigozhin directly and possibly immensely. The personal grievance issue also opens the door to the possibility that Prigozhin was cleverly playing his own game in an attempt to maintain his status and benefits as director and head of the group, possibly making him in intelligence jargon a double or even a triple agent depending on how many levels and varieties of his numerous potential contacts he has been manipulating.

One point that Prigozhin made that most sources concede to have resonance is his claim that the Ukraine war should be pushed to a conclusion, with the implication that the Russian people are getting tired of it.

In effect, he was challenging why Russia went to war in the first place as well as the execution of it since that time. Colonel Douglas Macgregor [opines that](#) Putin will have to think hard over whether he can continue the relatively slow methodical destruction of the Ukrainian Army or speed things up, with a corresponding increase in deaths, to bring an end to the process and avoid unrest among the Russian public and also among the many grumbling rank-and-file soldiers over the issue of how the war is being fought. There are reports from Moscow that the Putin regime is indeed responding to possible unrest, with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) monitoring social media posts and internet inquiries by ordinary Russians to determine levels of public support. Ukrainian sources, admittedly unreliable, are [claiming that](#) 17 out of Russia’s 46 regions might have supported Prigozhin.

So what do I think? I believe that CIA has come to the conclusion that the “coup” as it played out was a “deception operation” carried out by Prigozhin and Putin *inter alia* to embarrass the western intelligence agencies which may have been able to contact Prigozhin and induce him somehow to march on Moscow.

Beyond that, whether Prigozhin as this played out may have changed his mind on how to perform due to exposure of the plan to Russian intelligence or because he never intended to comply with any agreement in the first place is unknowable at this point.

So, was there a real insurrection or coup? I honestly don't know but rather suspect that Prigozhin seriously wanted to challenge the generals in Moscow over how the war was being fought.

Was there a western and NATO hand in what developed? Almost certainly, though exactly how that developed is unclear and may never be known. Ditto how the Russian side was playing the cards it was dealt though the dropping of charges against Prigozhin rather suggests that there was considerable maneuvering behind the scenes to produce an outcome that would not heighten the admittedly low-level threat of the march on Moscow turning into a removal of Putin's government. The coup story still has considerable legs in the US and western media, which predictably are out to fry Vladimir Putin, and there is even considerable reporting and commentary coming from Russian sources. It will be very interesting to see what might surface in the next several weeks.

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