

## **Prigozhin's Gambit—Treason by any other name**

By Scott Ritter, 25 June 2023

In the 1997 Disney animated musical fantasy film, *Hercules*, there is a particularly catchy number, *Zero to Hero*, which describes the rise of the star of the film from a clumsy boy into a strong and capable man. In the span of less than 24 hours, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the public face of the Wagner Group, a Russian private military contractor with shadowy ties to Russian military intelligence, has flipped the script of this ashes to diamonds tale, transforming an organization that had, through virtue of its impressive battlefield performance, become a legendary symbol of Russian patriotism and strength, into a discredited band of disgruntled traitors seeking the violent overthrow of the constitutional government of Russia on behalf of nations who seek the strategic defeat and ultimate destruction of Russia.

If Disney were to write a song about Prigozhin and Wagner today, it would be called *Hero to Zero*.

Let there be no doubt in anyone's mind—Yevgeny Prigozhin has become a *witting* agent of Ukraine and the intelligence services of the collective West. And while there may be those within Wagner who have been unwittingly drawn into this act of high treason through deception and subterfuge, in the aftermath of Russian President Vladimir Putin's address to the Russian nation on June 24, and Yevgeny Prigozhin's impolitic reply, there can be no doubt that there are only two sides in this struggle—the side of constitutional legitimacy, and the side of unconstitutional treason and sedition. Anyone who continues to participate in Prigozhin's coup has aligned themselves on the wrong side of the law and have themselves become outlaws.

Having taken Wagner down this unfortunate path, one needs to examine the motivations—stated and otherwise—that could prompt such a dangerous course of action. First and foremost, Prigozhin's gambit must be looked at for what it is—an act of desperation. For all its military prowess, Wagner as a fighting force is unsustainable for any period without the logistical support of the Russian Ministry of Defense. The fuel that powers Wagner's vehicles, the ammunition that gives its weapons their lethality, the food that nourishes its fighters—all comes from the very organization that Prigozhin has set his sights on usurping. This reality means that to succeed, Prigozhin would need to rally sufficient support behind his cause capable of not only sustaining his gambit but offsetting the considerable power of the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Russian Federation which, if left intact, would be able to readily defeat the forces of Wagner in any large-scale combat.

In short, Prigozhin is looking to create a so-called “Moscow Mайдan” designed to replicate the success of the events of early 2014 in Kiev, where the constitutionally elected government of President Victor Yanukovich was toppled from power through violence and force of will that was orchestrated by Ukrainian nationalists supported by the US and Europe. The fantasy of a “Moscow Mайдan” has been at the center of the strategy of the collective West and their Ukrainian proxy from the very start. Premised on the notion of a weak Russian president propped up by a thoroughly corrupt oligarch class, the idea of creating the conditions for the rise of sufficient domestic unrest capable of bringing down the Putin government like a proverbial house of cards was the primary objective of the sanctions regime imposed by the West after the initiation of the Special Military Operation (SMO) on February 24, 2022. The failure of the sanctions to generate such a result compelled the collective West to double-down on the notion of collapsing the Russian government, this time

using a military solution. The British Prime Minister pressured his Ukrainian counterpart to forgo a negotiated settlement to the conflict that was ready to be signed in Istanbul on April 1, 2022, and instead engage in a protracted war with Russia fueled by tens of billions of dollars' worth of military and financial assistance designed to inflict military losses on Russia sufficient to trigger domestic unrest—the elusive “Moscow Mайдan.”

This effort likewise failed.

Failing to create the conditions conducive for the collapse of domestic support for Putin and the Ukrainian conflict by pressuring Russia from without, the collective West began working to create the conditions for bringing down Russia by sowing internal seeds of dissention. This strategy hinged on a very sophisticated information warfare scheme which simultaneously sought to suppress and discredit narratives which sustained the official position of the Russian government, while building up covert agents of influence within social media outlets deemed to be influential amongst the Russian public. Using these channels, the pro-Ukrainian practitioners of information war began promulgating narratives intended to highlight the failings of the Russian government and, more specifically, persons close to President Putin who were affiliated with the SMO. By focusing their angst on what these channels were highlighting as the “failures” of the SMO, the information warfare practitioners were able to wrap themselves in the mantle of “patriotism,” claiming only to be looking out for the best interests of “Mother Russia,” all the while denigrating the character of the constitutional government.

There were several compelling narratives that were used by these information warfare specialists to serve as the foundation of their attack on Putin's Russia. One of the more popular was grounded in the mythology of “2014” and the early resistance to the Ukrainian nationalists who sought to impose their policies of cultural and linguistic genocide on the ethnic Russian population of the Donbas. Let there be no doubt—the fighting that took place in the initial months and years of the Donbas conflict was difficult and bloody, and those who rallied to the cause of the ethnic Russians of the Donbas deserve tremendous credit for their courage and resilience in the face of a dangerous enemy. But this resistance also served to foster a sense of entitlement among the early leaders and participants of this resistance which often transformed into resentment against Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, for abandoning the citizens of the Donbas to their own fate. The combination of resentful entitlement turned into hostility after the initiation of the SMO, when these “originals” took umbrage at what they deemed to be the inadequate intervention on the part of the Russian government and the perceived incompetence of the Russian military. Characters such as Igor Girkin (perhaps better known by his *nom de guerre*, Strelkov) and Russell “Texas” Bentley perfected the art of “patriotic” criticism which, intentionally or not, was used by Russia's enemies to further the notion of a weak and ineffective Russian government vulnerable to intervention by “real” Russian patriots who were concerned about “corruption” and “inefficiency” in the Putin regime. The pro-Ukrainian information warfare outlets were able to help magnify these “patriotic” voices of dissent by disseminating their message using Telegram and YouTube channels.

An expansion on the theme of “betrayed patriot” involves the Wagner Group itself and is pertinent to the present matter. The origins of the private military contract company, Wagner, are murky, but appear to be linked to the events of 2014 in the Donbas and the need for the Russian government to create a vehicle for the provision of relevant military expertise and material to the ethnic Russian resistance in the Donbas that would not conflict with Russian

constitutional prohibitions against the deployment of regular Russian Army personnel on foreign soil. From its inception, Wagner was an adjunct of Russian Military Intelligence (GRU), and responsive to the commands of the Russian General Staff. This placed Wagner in the shadowy space between being an official agent of government policy and an independently-funded private military contractor.

Following the initiation of the SMO, the role played by Wagner in the Donbas conflict expanded, transitioning from an advisory capacity to major combatant by expanding the scope and scale of the Wagner presence. Wagner grew into a Corps-sized formation equipped with heavy weapons, including armor and artillery, as well as fixed-wing fighter aircraft, and was assigned responsibility for a section of the frontlines which included the twin-salt mining towns of Soledar and Bakhmut, both of which had been heavily fortified by the Ukrainian military. The bloody fighting for the Soledar-Bakhmut complex, which became known by the sobriquet “the meatgrinder,” helped transform Wagner into a legendary combat force in the minds of most Russians, and elevated Prigozhin’s profile considerably.

Wagner achieved its well-deserved martial reputation largely because it was able to operate independent of the suffocating bureaucracy of the Russian military. Thus liberated, Wagner was able to best exploit the experience and skill of its veteran fighters, streamlining command and control and tactical decision-making to enable Wagner to seize and maintain operational initiative, allowing Wagner to dominate the battlefield. While Wagner had operational independence, it received its operational tasking from the Russian General Staff, which also provided Wagner with the weapons, ammunition, fuel, and other logistical sustainment necessary to carry out its assigned mission.

The legal status of Wagner was secure so long as the territory it operated on was not Russian. This changed, however, in the aftermath of the September 2022 referendum which saw the Donbas transition from being an independent entity to being part of Russia. Wagner was able to maintain its unique status during the political transition of the Donbas to full Russian constitutional control, but once this transition was completed, sometime in early 2023, reality came home to roost. Logistical requisitions, which used to be treated as special requests approved as part of the general support provided by Russia to the Donbas, were not treated as part of the routine logistical establishment of the Russian ministry of Defense. From a practical standpoint, this meant that the quantities of ammunition, especially in terms of artillery shells, was cut back to reflect the “norm” used to support military formations of a similar size. Wagner tactics, however, were contingent upon the ability to support their operations with overwhelming fire support. Denied the quantities of ammunition they were used to receiving, Wagner’s assault detachment began to take heavy casualties, prompting Prigozhin to initiate a public feud with both Shoigu and Gerasimov, whom he accused of incompetence and corruption.

Prigozhin’s antics, which were played out in intimate detail on social media, caught the attention of pro-Ukrainian information warfare specialists, who began promoting the narrative of Prigozhin—a former convict with zero political experience—assuming a leadership position in Russia. Prigozhin himself seemed to feed off this notion. While publicly denying any such ambition, Prigozhin continued his public trolling of Shoigu and Gerasimov. The vitriol became so intense that Putin was compelled to summon both men to the Kremlin, where they were read the riot act by an irate Russian President and told in no uncertain terms to cease and desist or pay the consequences. Putin also at this time had Shoigu step back from being the overseer of Wagner logistical support, instead turning that

task over to General Sergey Surovikin, a senior military commander overseeing the air component of the SMO.

In retrospect, this was a mistake, as it only reinforced the notion in Prigozhin's mind that if he made a big enough scene, Putin would yield to his desires.

At some point in time, Prigozhin appears to have gone off the rails completely. Even after the presidential intervention, Prigozhin continued his public feud with both Shoigu and Gerasimov, at one point threatening to pull Wagner out of Bakhmut before that battle was concluded. Prigozhin went out of his way to promote himself as a frontline commander, appearing in videos he published on Telegram visiting the Wagner fighters on the frontline, often under fire, and then contrasting this with what Prigozhin articulated as the timid behavior of Shoigu and Gerasimov, whom Prigozhin mocked for managing the SMO from the safety of bunkers far from the zone of conflict.

At some point in time Prigozhin's antics caught the attention of Ukrainian intelligence, and their British and US counterparts. The narcissistic need for attention, coupled with grandiose notions of self-importance, made Prigozhin an ideal candidate for recruitment by a hostile foreign intelligence service. A financial component—basic greed—can be added to this behavioral model as well. In addition to seeking to bring Wagner under the operational control of the Ministry of Defense through the rationing of ammunition, Defense Minister Shoigu announced that Wagner fighters would have to sign legally binding contracts with the Russian Minister of Defense to allow them to continue to serve in their capacity as a combat unit. The reason for this was the constitutional ban on private military companies operating on Russian soil. The Russian government was willing to turn a blind eye to this legality while the battle for Bakhmut raged, but once the “meatgrinder” shut down, and Wagner was withdrawn from the front for a period of well-deserved rest and refitting, the Ministry of Defense announced that before Wagner could resume its combat operations (Prigozhin indicated that Wagner would return to fighting around August 5), its fighters and commanders would have to sign contracts. The deadline for signing contracts was set for July 1.

According to Prigozhin, the military council of commanders—the real leaders of Wagner—refused to allow these contracts to be signed. Wagner and Shoigu were heading for a confrontation. Wagner was, during this time, building upon the good will of the Russian people that had been earned in the bloody fighting for Bakhmut. Wagner was engaged in an unprecedented public relations campaign designed to imprint on the Russian people the heroic status its fighters enjoyed, all the while seeking to recruit new fighters into its ranks. The success of this public relations campaign only reinforced in the mindset of Prigozhin the notion that he and Wagner were more popular amongst the Russian people than were Shoigu, Gerasimov, and the Russian Ministry of Defense.

The collusion between Prigozhin and the Ukrainians, while unproven at this juncture, appears obvious in retrospect. One of the key indicators is the decision by the Ukrainians to send so-called “anti-Putin” Russian forces across the border into the Belgorod region of Russia, helping create the impression of Russian impotence and incompetence, notions Prigozhin was only too happy to magnify on his own Telegram channels. This message was then further disseminated by Ukrainian-controlled Telegram channels, including those which operated under the guise of serving “Russian patriots.”

Soon both Prigozhin and the ostensible “pro-Russian” social media accounts were highlighting the potential of a Russian Civil War and the collapse of the Putin regime in a repeat of the collapse experienced in the Russian Army in 1917, leading to the downfall of Tsarist rule and the Romanov dynasty. Indeed, informed observers have stated that many of the Wagner fighters who accompanied Prigozhin into Russia as part of the ongoing armed insurrection apparently believed that they were being dispatched to reinforce the border region to guard against future incursions into Russia by forces loyal to Ukraine.

If the goal of Prigozhin was to achieve the collapse of the Putin regime, it appears to have failed miserably. No political leaders, no military leaders of units, no oligarchs have rallied to Prigozhin’s cause. Russia appears to be firmly behind President Putin, and supportive of his stated goal of bringing this insurrection to an end using all means necessary. While Prigozhin claimed to have assembled a force of some 25,000 men for his march on Moscow, the reality is the total number of Wagner soldiers involved is no more than half that number.

Unless Wagner receives substantial assistance, this invasion force will soon run into sustainability issues—gas, ammunition, and food supplies will become problematic. Moreover, as Russian forces begin to physically confront Wagner, it will become crystal clear to the actual fighters that far from defending Russia from a corrupt and inept regime, Wagner has become a pariah, forever linked in the minds of Russia as traitors who sought to stick a knife in Russia’s back at a time of great peril to the survival of the nation—in short, Wagner will have transitioned from Hero to Zero.

What Prigozhin and his supporters, both in the command and rank and file of Wagner, and those collaborators in the social media universe, have done in attacking the constitutional government of Russia is nothing short of treason. Unless something extreme happens in the next day or two, it is inevitable that Wagner will be defeated. The history books will always punctuate its existence as an organization with perfidy of having betrayed Russia to its enemies. But the critical point here isn’t Wagner’s treasonous behavior, but rather the fact that Russia’s enemies—in particular the British and American intelligence services—saw fit to facilitate a substantive armed insurrection designed to remove from power the government of a nuclear armed power. Imagine, for a moment, the righteous ire that would be on display in the halls of Congress and within the walls of the White House if Russian intelligence had actively conspired to have an entity like Blackwater march on Washington, DC with the goal of removing President Biden from power.

It would, some might say, constitute an act of war.

Russian nuclear doctrine allows for Russia to use nuclear weapons when faced with an existential threat to the survival of the Russian state.

If the CIA and MI-6 were involved in the recruitment of Prigozhin with an eye toward facilitating Wagner’s march on Moscow, then they would have been directly engaged in an action that constituted an existential threat to Russia.

Russia would, under its doctrine, have every right to use nuclear weapons in response.

For everyone cheering Prigozhin along this morning, think on that long and hard as you chew on your breakfast.

Because if Prigozhin were to succeed, there may be no tomorrow.