

Prigozhin drops threat to pull out and the battle for Bakhmut continues



UK Defence Intelligence update on Russian attacks and troop locations as of Friday.

Last Friday, Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose private military company, the Wagner Group, has been at the forefront of the battle for Bakhmut for the past several months, posted an extraordinary video in which he blamed the Russian military leadership for his troops' failure to take full control of the largely destroyed city. In the video, Prigozhin, surrounded by a large number of bodies of Wagner fighters, said, "These are the Wagner PMC guys who died today, still bleeding fresh. Now listen to me – these are somebody's fathers and sons. And those who don't give us ammunition will be in hell. We have a 70 percent ammunition shortage [expletive]! Shoigu [the minister of defense]! Gerasimov [the Chief of the General Staff]! Where is the [expletive] ammunition? Look at them!"

Soon thereafter, he released an equally extraordinary statement on Telegram in which he announced that the Wagner Group would transfer responsibility for the battle in Bakhmut to the Russian military as of Wednesday: "By May 9, 2023 [Victory Day, marking the defeat of Nazi Germany], we were supposed to take Bakhmut, but knowing this, from May 1 near-military bureaucrats practically cut us off from any artillery ammunition. The units of the Russian Defense Ministry, which are designed to cover our flanks, are having a hard time holding them back. Due to the lack of ammunition, our losses are growing exponentially every day. I am officially addressing the Chief of the General Staff, the Minister of Defense, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief [Putin] and the people of Russia. I declare on behalf of the Wagner PMC fighters, on behalf of the Wagner PMC command, that on May 10, 2023, we are forced to transfer positions in the Bakhmut settlement to units of the Ministry of Defense and withdraw the

remnants of the Wagner PMC to the rear camps to lick their wounds. I am withdrawing Wagner units from Bakhmut because, in the absence of ammunition, they are doomed to a senseless death. I appeal openly, since not a single letter of mine was considered, I reported on all the problems starting from March 19, 2022." Later Friday, in another video, Prigozhin blamed the military chiefs for the "tens of thousands" of Russians killed and wounded in Ukraine: "The dead and wounded – and that's tens of thousands of men – lie on the conscience of those who did not give us ammunition, and this is Defense Minister Shoigu and this is Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov. For the tens of thousands killed and wounded, they will bear responsibility before their mothers and children, and I will make sure of that."

On Saturday, in a video posted on his Telegram channel, Prigozhin made it clear the Wagner Group was still engaged in the battle for Bakhmut but implied it would soon be leaving. Standing in front of a number of destroyed buildings, he said, "Behind us is Bakhmut, it remains approximately 2.5 km to take – and the city will be taken... The enemy pulls up daily from 400 to 600 people, they lose approximately the same number daily. The units of PMC Wagner work in lockstep. The enemy does not spare artillery ammunition. A sufficient number of various foreign-made armored vehicles have appeared... The enemy is well equipped, well trained, acts as one and resists with dignity, so we move on."

But there was still considerable uncertainty about how, if at all, the Russian military leadership would respond to Prigozhin's expletive-laced videos and statement. On Sunday, the answer came in another audio message he posted on his Telegram channel. He announced the Wagner Group will not pull out from Bakhmut on May 10 after all: "We have been promised as much ammunition and weapons as we need to continue further operations. We have been promised that everything needed to prevent the enemy from cutting us off (from supplies) will be deployed." He added that he had been assured that Gen. Sergey Surovikin, who had been the commander of the Joint Group of Forces of the "special military operation" – Putin's euphemism for the invasion – from last October until January, when Gerasimov took over, will from now on take "all decisions concerning Wagner's military operations in cooperation with the defense ministry." Surovikin, who has served since January as one of Gerasimov's three deputies, is often referred to in the press as "General Armageddon" because of the brutal bombardment of Aleppo and other cities in Syria by Russian forces under his command. Prigozhin was delighted: Surovikin, he said, "is the only decorated general that knows how to fight."

After visiting the Ukrainian troops along the frontline in Bakhmut yesterday, Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, the commander of ground forces, said the Russian forces were increasing the intensity of their shelling of Bakhmut with heavy weapons as well as using more advanced equipment and were reorganizing their troops with the ambition of taking the city by Tuesday, Victory Day: "Today," he said, "it is important to make decisions as quickly as possible and predict the actions of the enemy. The Russians still

hope to capture the city by May 9. Our task is to prevent this.” He said the increased fighting “shows that the enemy is not going to change their plans and is doing everything possible to take Bakhmut under control and continue offensive actions.”

And so the war goes on.

David R. Cameron

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