

After Prigozhin rant, Wagner Group enters Russia & heads toward Moscow, but turns back after hearing, via Lukashenko, from Putin.



Wagner Group troops in Rostov-on-Don today.

Yesterday, Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose private military company, the Wagner Group, has been deeply involved in Russia's war in Ukraine, issued another of his extraordinary rants against the Russian military authorities, this one all the more extraordinary because, for the first time, he publicly challenged not only the leadership of the ministry of defense but also that of President Putin. In a video interview, Prigozhin accused the military leadership of attacking a Wagner camp and killing a large number of Wagner troops: "They sneakily deceived us, trying to deprive us of the opportunity to defend our homes and instead hunt down Wagner PMC. We were ready to compromise with the Ministry of Defense to hand over our weapons and find a solution how we will continue to defend our country. But they didn't calm down. They saw that we weren't broken and launched strikes on our camps. A huge amount of our fighters were killed, our comrades in arms. We will make a decision about how to respond to these atrocities. The next step is ours... The evil that is being carried out must be stopped. They disregard the lives of soldiers, they have forgotten the word 'justice'... The details started to appear: Minister of Defense arrived to Rostov especially to conduct an operation to destroy Wagner PMC. He used artillerymen and helicopter pilots undercover to destroy us."

Prigozhin didn't stop with attacking his usual targets, the Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoigu, and the Chief of the General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov. He attacked Putin as well, calling into question why he began Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022: "On Feb. 24, nothing extraordinary happened. Now, the

Ministry of Defense is trying to deceive the public, trying to deceive the president and tell the story that there was insane aggression on the part of Ukraine, and that they were going to attack us together with the NATO bloc. Therefore, the so-called special operation on Feb. 24 was launched for completely different reasons.” And for good measure, he challenged how the Russian military leadership is conducting the war: “The reality right now is that the Russian army is retreating in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson directions. The Armed Forces of Ukraine are pushing through the Russian army, we are washing ourselves with blood, no one deploys reserves, there is no control.”

Late last night, Prigozhin said his troops will punish Shoigu in an armed rebellion and urged the army not to offer resistance. “This is not a military coup,” he said, “but a march of justice.” And early today, in a video in the courtyard of Russia’s southern military headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, adjacent to eastern Ukraine, he said, “We’re blockading the city of Rostov and going to Moscow.” He demanded to see Shoigu and Gerasimov and said, “We will destroy anyone who stands in our way. We are moving forward and will go to the end.” He claimed that Gerasimov and Shoigu had scrambled warplanes to strike the Wagner forces and they were being attacked by rockets, helicopter gunships and artillery. Early today, the National Anti-Terrorism Committee, which is part of the Federal Security Services (FSB) charged Prigozhin with organizing an armed insurrection and urged the Wagner Group forces to arrest him and resist his “criminal and treacherous orders.” It said his statements were a “stab in the back to Russian troops” and amounted to fomenting an armed conflict in Russia.

This morning Putin spoke on television “addressing citizens of Russia, the personnel of the Armed Forces, law enforcement agencies and security services, and the soldiers and commanders who are now fighting in their combat positions, repulsing enemy attacks and doing it heroically...I am also addressing those who were dragged into this criminal adventure through deceit or threats and pushed onto the path of a grave crime – an armed mutiny.” He said, “Today, Russia is waging a tough struggle for its future, repelling the aggression of neo-Nazis and their patrons. The entire military, economic and informational machine of the West is directed against us. We are fighting for the lives and security of our people, for our sovereignty and independence, for the right to be and remain Russia, a state with a thousand-year history. This battle, when the fate of our nation is being decided, requires consolidation of all forces. It requires unity, consolidation and a sense of responsibility, and everything that weakens us, any strife that our external enemies can use and do so to subvert us from within, must be discarded. Therefore, any actions that split our nation are essentially a betrayal of our people, of our comrades-in-arms who are now fighting at the frontline. This is a knife in the back of our country and our people.”

Continuing, Putin said, “What we are facing is essentially a betrayal. Inflated ambitions and personal interests have led to treason – treason against our country, our people and the common cause which Wagner Group soldiers and commanders were fighting and dying for shoulder to shoulder, together with our other units and troops. The heroes

who liberated Soledar and Artyomovsk [Bakhmut], towns and villages in Donbass, fought and gave their lives for Novorossiia and the unity of the Russian world. Their memory and glory have also been betrayed by those who are attempting to stage a revolt and are pushing the country towards anarchy and fratricide – and ultimately, towards defeat and surrender. Once again, any internal revolt is a deadly threat to our statehood and our nation. It is a blow to Russia, to our people. Our actions to defend the Fatherland from this threat will be harsh. All those who have consciously chosen the path of betrayal, planned an armed mutiny and taken the path of blackmail and terrorism, will inevitably be punished and will answer before the law and our people. The Armed Forces and other government agencies have received the necessary orders. Additional counterterrorism measures are now in effect in Moscow, the Moscow Region and several other regions. Resolute action will also be taken to stabilize the situation in Rostov-on-Don. It remains difficult; in effect, the work of civil and military authorities has been blocked. As the President of Russia and Supreme Commander-in-Chief, and as a citizen of Russia, I will take every effort to defend the country and protect the constitutional order as well as the lives, security, and freedom of our citizens. Those who staged the mutiny and took up arms against their comrades – they have betrayed Russia and will be brought to account. I urge those who are being dragged into this crime not to make a fatal and tragic mistake but make the only right choice: to stop taking part in criminal actions. I am certain that we will preserve and defend what we hold dear and sacred, and together with our Motherland we will overcome any hardships and become even stronger.”

Meanwhile, news reports indicated the Wagner Group forces were moving northward on the M4 and had reached Voronezh, which is about halfway between Rostov and Moscow. As the Wagner forces continued to move northward toward Moscow, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko was in contact with Putin and Prigozhin. We don't know what the message was that he conveyed from Putin to Prigozhin, but eventually Prigozhin agreed to turn around and go back to Ukraine. Lukashenko's office issued a statement saying they had spoken throughout the day: “As a result, they came to agreements on the inadmissibility of unleashing a bloody massacre on the territory of Russia. Yevgeny Prigozhin accepted the proposal of the president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, to stop the movement of armed personnel of the Wagner company inside Russia and take additional steps to de-escalate tensions. At the moment there is a completely constructive and acceptable option of resolving the situation, with security guarantees for the Wagner PMC fighters on the table.” Prigozhin, for his part said, “During this time we did not spill a single drop of blood of our fighters. Taking responsibility for the fact that Russian blood will be shed – on one side – we will turn our columns around and go in the opposite direction to field camps, according to the plan.”

David R. Cameron
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