

# Who Killed Yevgeny Prigozhin?

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*Although Wagner leader Yevgeni Prigozhin had reportedly been banished to Belarus after his brief and spectacularly unsuccessful rebellion, he seemingly enjoyed a surprising freedom of movement. He apparently traveled between Belarus and Africa and traveled frequently between St. Petersburg and Moscow. He even made a very public and conspicuous [appearance](#) in July at the Russia-Africa summit where he met with African representatives and praised Vladimir Putin. But on August 23, Prigozhin was killed in a plane crash.*

It could have been an accident: planes crash, and Prigozhin flew often. It could have been a murder. There is no shortage of people who might have wanted Prigozhin dead. Forces in Niger - whose coup government had just [requested](#) Wagner's [help](#) and whom Prigozhin had just [praised](#) - or parties with an interest in Niger, or an interest in arresting Russia's influence in Africa, might have wanted to put an end to [his recent campaign](#) to recruit mercenary soldiers to Africa. Ukraine or Poland, upon whose border Wagner's forces were massing, might have wanted to eliminate him. The US or Ukraine might have wanted to destabilize Russia by rekindling the struggle between Moscow, the Ministry of Defense and now angry and vengeful Wagner forces. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu or Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, whom Prigozhin wanted removed, might have wanted to remove him.

But most people will point to Putin. Most people will say that Putin was just waiting to kill him to remove a threat and punish a traitor.

President Biden and CIA Director William Burns had both previously predicted that Putin would kill Prigozhin. Both [suggested](#) that Prigozhin shouldn't fire his food taster. But despite Burns' claim that Putin is "the ultimate apostle of payback," the many media claims over the years that Putin habitually arranges the murders of opponents are unsupported. The late Stephen Cohen, who was Professor Emeritus of Politics and director of Russian Studies at Princeton, dismisses the charge in a single sentence, declaring it the easiest accusation against Putin to refute "because there is no actual evidence . . . to support it."

In his biography of Putin, Philip Short dedicates more pages to the charge but comes up with a slightly more accusatory but similar verdict. By not punishing people who arranged killings, Putin may have “allowed a climate to develop” in which powerful people could order killings. But “contrary to widespread belief in the West,” Putin “did not” authorize the killings. Short reports that, “once the fog of conspiracy theories cleared,” responsibility for some of the most famous killings were “traced back to the entourage of Chechen leader, Ramzan Kadyrov.” Short calls the evidence massed against Putin in one of the most famous cases “entirely circumstantial.” Of the long list of “high-profile” killings in Russia, Short concludes that “with the exception of Litvinenko, none had been killed at Putin’s behest.” Short argues that in a list of ten suspicious deaths compiled by the *Washington Post*, “only the death of Alexandr Litvinenko can be laid firmly at Putin’s door. All the others appear to have been killed for reasons unconnected with the Kremlin.” Cohen argues that, despite the verdict that Putin was “probably” responsible for Litvinenko, “there is still no conclusive proof” even for that one death. Of the two cases that cemented Putin’s reputation as a murderous thug in the media, Cohen says that “Not a shred of actual proof points to Putin in either case.”

A skeptical cloud over the case against Putin in the death of Prigozhin is the flamboyant blowing up of his plane in Russian skies just outside Moscow. Assassinations are usually made of more subtle stuff.

The strongest circumstantial case against Putin is the seemingly more coordinated than coincidental firing, or demoting, of General Sergei Surovikin on the same day. On June 27, *The New York Times* [reported](#) that, according to US officials, Surovikin “had advance knowledge of Yevgeny Prigozhin’s plans to rebel against Russia’s military leadership.” When Prigozhin demanded the removal of Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, he [nominated](#) Surovikin to replace him. Surovikin lost his job, and Prigozhin lost his life on the same day: a coincidence that at least suggests a coordinated plan, if Surovikin did, in fact, know of the rebellion and kept the knowledge from the Kremlin, to remove the two most powerful men behind the mutiny.

It may be long before the evidence is in – if it is ever in – on what happened the day Yevgeni Prigozhin died. But, though there is a case against Putin, it is far from a closed case. And, despite the constant claims, there is not a well-established line of high profile killings ordered by Putin to add to the evidence. There are also a number of other parties with a motive that should not be allowed to walk away just yet. That list includes, not just Putin, but ousted elements in Niger; parties, including the US, France and the political West with an interest in Niger and broader influence in Africa; countries, including the US and Ukraine, with an interest in restarting the Wagner-Moscow war; Poland with its Wagner crowded Belarusian border; and even other elements, like Shoigu and Gerasimov, in Russia who had felt Prigozhin’s danger.

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