

Yevgeny Prigozhin buried as some Russians make memorials for Wagner chief : NPR

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Prigozhin is buried in St. Petersburg as Russians make memorials for the Wagner chief

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By

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MOSCOW — Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Russian mercenary group Wagner, was buried Tuesday in St. Petersburg, according to his press service.

The unannounced ceremony in the city's Porokhovskoye Cemetery was attended by a small number of people. The cemetery itself was heavily guarded by Russian police and security personnel.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov had said on Tuesday that Russian President Vladimir Putin would not attend Prigozhin's funeral.

Prigozhin was killed last week, at age 62, in the crash of a business jet northwest of Moscow. All 10 people aboard died. Passengers included the senior Wagner Group leadership in addition to Prigozhin, according to Russian authorities.

Officially shunned, Prigozhin was nonetheless mourned by many in Russia

In the past few days, makeshift memorials to Prigozhin appeared in his hometown of St. Petersburg, and in Moscow, in a park near the Kremlin.

In Moscow, a banner flew above a pile of flowers carefully arrayed on a sidewalk. It read, "To be a Warrior is to Live Forever."

An apparent Wagner mercenary — masked in full-body camouflage and wearing a patch with the group's skull insignia — tended to candles, mounds of roses and photographs of Prigozhin and other Wagner commanders killed in last week's plane crash.

Asked what the world should know about the Wagner chief, he said Prigozhin was "a Russian patriot," before promptly cutting off the interview.

But onlookers were more open with their views, expressing a mixture of grief, pride and scorn for a figure whose mercenary force has become a global household name for its exploits in Ukraine, Syria and on the African continent.

Azad Bikmulin traveled over 500 miles to Moscow from the city of Kazan to pay respects, saying, "My father serves in Wagner."

Bikmulin said the last time he heard from his father was a month ago. He speculated his father could now be on assignment in Africa, or maybe Belarus. Perhaps, he added, Prigozhin — against all odds — was even with him.

Charles Maynes/NPR

"[Prigozhin] might still be alive," said Bikmulin, noting Russian media had erroneously reported the Wagner leader's death several times before. "We still haven't seen a body. Until then his death is just a rumor."

Conspiracy theories claiming Prigozhin's possible survival have thrived in the wake of the crash. A flight manifest listed the Wagner chief among passengers. But it wasn't until four days after the crash — on Sunday — that Russia's Investigative Committee said forensic testing confirmed Prigozhin was among the dead.

Many, like Bikmulin, still refuse to believe it.

Bikmulin's mother, Alfiya, approached and said her husband had signed up for Wagner because of Prigozhin's leadership skills.

"She trusted him," she explained. "Prigozhin was with the people. And that's why bureaucrats and the leadership didn't like him."

"He looked like a guy who put his principles over the Russian propaganda," explained Ivan, 23, a lawyer who — like many at the Moscow memorial — asked his last name be withheld so he could speak freely out of concerns of government reprisals.

Ivan said he was against the war in Ukraine and disapproved of Prigozhin's cruel system of wartime justice — in some instances, executions meted out by sledge hammer.

But Ivan said he recognized Prigozhin's plain talk about the struggles on the front and failures inside the Defense Ministry made him a rising political star to many in Russia.

"He gained his points when he criticized the minister of defense," he said, adding the approach had been "successful" until Prigozhin overplayed his hand with a rebellion against Russia's military leadership in June.

"It ended in tragedy," he added.

Bustling by the memorial on her way to the local Orthodox church, pensioner Irina Pavlova said Prigozhin's mutiny was his undoing — at least in God's eyes.

She noted that Prigozhin's fighters had fired on and killed at least a dozen Russian soldiers on their way to Moscow before Putin "wisely" ended the uprising with an amnesty deal.

"I believe in God's will," said Pavlova. "Prigozhin fulfilled his mission on Earth and the Lord came to take him away."

Widespread suspicions hold that the jet crash was not an accident

Russian authorities are conducting an investigation into what caused a plane carrying Prigozhin to suddenly plummet to the ground a little more than 30 minutes after it took off from Moscow for St. Petersburg last Wednesday.

Russian internet commenters and global sleuths have speculated the plane might have been taken down by a bomb or a rocket.

Nastya, a liberal activist who stopped by the memorial wearing a pin in honor of Boris Nemtsov — a popular opposition leader assassinated near the Kremlin in 2015 — said whatever the cause of Prigozhin's demise, it wasn't by chance.

"It was revenge for the uprising," she said. "It's hard to believe it's just a coincidence that the crash happened two months to the day after the rebellion."

Few gathered at the memorial wanted to discuss who exactly they believed might have wanted Prigozhin dead.

The United States and European allies have suggested President Putin may have ordered an assassination.

The Kremlin has dismissed the charges as "absolute lies."

"99.9% of people know what happened," said Alexander, a Wagner supporter and native of eastern Ukraine who said he fled his country after being charged with separatism by the authorities in Kyiv.

"But you know where we live ... and why we can't say it out loud."