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How A Notorious Mercenary Company Scours Siberian Prisons For Soldiers To Fight In Ukraine



Prisoners at the maximum-security correctional colony No. 3 in Barnaul, Russia.

A man wearing military fatigues, a balaclava, and a special forces insignia showed up at Correctional Colony No. 29 in the Russian coal-mining region of Kemerovo on October 3.

During that evening's inspection, with several hundred inmates lined up in one of the prison's outdoor yards, the unnamed man made a public offer: Sign up "for a trip to Ukraine," according to one inmate who spoke by phone with [Siberia Realities](#), a regional unit of RFE/RL's Russian Service.

About 200 expressed interest, said the inmate, who participated and even recorded a video of the encounter but asked to remain anonymous, fearing punishment from prison officials.

By month's end, however, interest had waned, the inmate said. That's when recruiters from the notorious private mercenary company Vagner showed up.

"On October 26th they cut off communications, as they always do when the 'Vagnerites' arrive," he said, referring to prison authorities. "The jammers were reconfigured, so everyone was sitting around without any communications those days."

"And they began to show films about Vagner," he said. One was called The Best In Hell.



Russian recruits board a bus near a military recruitment center in Krasnodar, Russia, on September 25.

As Russia's war on Ukraine lurches into a new, uncertain phase, Russian authorities have turned to the country's sprawling prison network to replenish the units depleted by nearly nine months of grinding conflict.

The Kremlin's mobilization of military reserves, announced on September 21, targeted 300,000 men to be sent either into battle and or other supporting roles in Ukraine. Thousands are already believed to be in some frontline positions: in the Kherson region, where Russian troops beat an embarrassing retreat earlier this month; and in the Donbas, where fighting is intensifying.

The overall casualty figure Russia has suffered since the February 24 invasion is unclear. Western officials, however, say between 80,000 and 90,000 troops have been killed or wounded.

In addition to mobilization, officials have also turned to **less traditional methods** to bolster troop numbers. That includes loosening age and other **physical requirements** for newly mobilized soldiers, as well as outright recruitment of new volunteers.

And since at least July, that effort has included recruiting some of the **estimated 470,000 inmates** in the custody of the Federal Penitentiary Service.

Leading that effort is the Vagner Group, the private company owned by a Kremlin-connected businessman whose fighters have been credibly implicated in war crimes in countries including Syria, Libya, and the Central African Republic.

'The Highest Level Of Consciousness'

Reports that Vagner was recruiting prison inmates **first emerged** in the St. Petersburg area over the summer. Vagner's founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, denied the reports, and called for a criminal investigation of the news outlet, Fontanka, which first reported the effort.

In a video that circulated widely within Russia about a month later, Prigozhin was shown speaking to inmates in a prison in the Volga River region of Mari El. Prigozhin promised inmates early release from prison in exchange for serving a six-month combat tour in Ukraine.

In the two months since, **more reports** have emerged from across Russia documenting prison inmates being thrown into battle -- and in some cases, dying in numbers greater than regular Russian forces or professional trained mercenaries.

Earlier, the investigative news site The Insider **reviewed death notices** that were sent in September and October by Vagner executives to relatives and survivors of inmates who died fighting in Ukraine. The site tallied more than 500 killed.

Over those same two months, meanwhile, the country's overall male prison population **declined** by 23,000, according to the news site Mediazona, which specializes in matters of incarceration and justice. The site said the drop was unprecedented in recent memory and was likely due to the number of inmates being enlisted by Vagner.

Olga Romanova, an activist who runs an inmates' rights organization called Russia Behind Bars, [estimated](#) that up to 50,000 inmates could end up being recruited to fight in Ukraine.



A prisoner walks past fencing at the maximum security correctional colony in the village of Shara-Gorokhon, Karymsky district.

According to human rights activists and prison sources, Vagner recruiters visited facilities in at least six regions of Siberia and the Far East in November alone. Several hundred inmates signed up, mainly those serving longer sentences at maximum-security facilities.

Asked earlier this month by reporters about the Vagner recruiting effort, Prigozhin's company released a statement quoting him as comparing prisoners favorably with members of the elite.

"I think that prisoners have the highest level of consciousness, much higher than the Russian elite," Prigozhin, who has harshly criticized the Defense Ministry and is seen as a foe of relative liberals in Russia's ruling circles, said in the November 11 [post on Telegram](#). "Because prisoners are ordinary men of the plow who have at some point been unlucky in life -- this is why they responded so massively as volunteers."

'They Are Badly Beaten, They Cannot Walk On Their Own'

At Kemerovo's Correctional Colony No. 29, about 100 inmates ended up taking the offers that were ultimately made by a delegation of Vagner officers who arrived on October 26, said the inmate who spoke to Siberia.Realities.

The conditions of employment: full amnesty for crimes committed and a monthly salary of 100,000 rubles (\$1,640), the inmate said -- better-than-average wages for Kemerovo, a largely depressed mining and industrial region in Siberia.

And in an echo of the loosened physical requirements for non-imprisoned soldiers, the Vagner recruiters accepted volunteers over 50 years of age, as well as those suffering from HIV or hepatitis.

The prison recruitment effort has been largely steeped in secrecy, which has alarmed relatives who fear their incarcerated husbands or sons don't fully understand what they are agreeing to.

At another Kemerovo region facility, Correctional Colony No. 37, some inmates reported being tied to hot radiators for hours, to pressure them to sign up for the mercenary company. According to some relatives' estimates, more than 100 prisoners left the facility in mid-November, apparently for training before being sent to the conflict.

"So those who refused are now back in the [prison], but they were badly beaten; they cannot walk on their own," said the wife of one inmate who also asked that her name to be used. "They don't let us see them. They don't even let us talk to them."

Another woman, Anna, said she lost contact with her husband, Artyom, also serving his sentence at No. 37, on November 5. She started writing letters to prison authorities demanding answers.

"Then a man called me from an unfamiliar number. He said he was my husband's cellmate; he said allegedly Artyom was forced to sign an agreement in order to send him to war. They flew him out on a military plane," she said. "He said they beat [Artyom] with a stun gun and tortured him with water. I know my husband would never volunteer for something like this. He had four years left! What kind of war is this?"

Earlier this month, the regional news site Taiga.Info **reported** that inmates at Correctional Colony No. 37 had been beaten and tortured, to force them to join Vagner.

The last time Svetlana, a woman from the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, 600 kilometers east of Kemerovo, saw or heard from her 38-year-old son, serving a five-year sentence on drug charges at Correctional Colony No. 5 on the city's outskirts, was at the end of October.

Typically, she said, she and her son were in touch regularly via text message.

WATCH: Olga Romanova, head of the Russia Behind Bars NGO, said she's seen reports from trusted inmates in at least three prisons who say Kremlin-connected businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin visited personally to recruit convicts as mercenaries to fight in Ukraine.

On November 9, Svetlana, who asked not to use her surname for security reasons, said she met with a prison warden who told her he was being sent to fight in Ukraine -- hired by Vagner.

A day later, her son called from an unfamiliar number and confirmed he had signed up to join Vagner. He had been transferred to a new facility close to the Ukrainian border.

She was outraged.

"On what basis did they let recruiters into the prison and allow them access to prisoners? And under what laws did they release the prisoners? It's not spelled out anywhere in the law," she told Siberia.Realities. "Why wasn't I notified?"

Another inmate in Correctional Colony No. 33, in the Pacific coastal region of Primorye, said a sizable number of inmates had signed up to join Vagner.



Inmates at the Novosibirsk region's Correctional Colony No. 8

In the northern region of Yakutia, rights activists said Vagner recruiters visited two rural maximum-security facilities south of the regional capital, Yakutsk, beginning November 14.

According to one Yakut activist who spoke on condition of anonymity, around 200 people volunteered. The activist also said some inmates reported threats that their sentences would be lengthened if they refused to volunteer.

The Vagner recruiting effort has been met with **resistance** in at least one location: On November 3, relatives of inmates at Correctional Colony No. 14, in the Siberian region of Novosibirsk, staged a small protest outside the facility, demanding access to prisoners who have agreed to join Vagner's fight.

Written by Mike Eckel based on reporting by RFE/RL's Siberia.Realities. Current Time contributed to this report.