

A captured member of the infamous Wagner Group said he is more 'afraid of Putin' than dying in battle, Ukrainian soldier reveals.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) looks on Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu (R) during a military parade in Pskov, Russia, on March,1, 2020. Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images© Provided by Business Insider

A captured Russian soldier said he is more afraid of Vladimir Putin than he is of dying in battle.

"We're afraid of Putin," a Ukrainian soldier recalled the man saying.

The Ukrainian soldier said the man joined Russia's Wagner Group to expunge his criminal record.

A captured fighter from Russia's Wagner Group told his Ukrainian captors he is more afraid of Russian President Vladimir Putin than he is of dying on the battlefield, a Ukrainian soldier revealed to CNN.

In an audio recording reviewed by CNN of the Ukrainian soldier questioning the Russian prisoner, Andriy told the man: "Obviously, you know that you will be killed [in battle.] But you're afraid to fight for your freedom in your country."

"Yes, this is true," the Ukrainian soldier named Andriy recalled the man replying. "We're afraid of Putin."

The Wagner fighter was an engineer, CNN reported, citing the audio recording. According to CNN, he had started selling drugs in Russia to make more money on the side, and he joined Wagner in hopes of expunging his criminal record so his daughter, who wants to be a lawyer, would run into fewer roadblocks in her future.

In the recording reviewed by CNN, Andriy asked the man when he realized he was "just meat," to which he replied: "At the first combat mission. They brought us to the frontline on December 28. They sent us forward last night."

Russian President Vladimir Putin is "desperate for a victory of any kind" ahead of the one-year anniversary of his invasion into Ukraine, and he's sending his troops into some of Ukraine's most heavily defended areas to try to get it, a former Australian general [said earlier this month](#).

To achieve this, Russia has been sending prisoners recruited by the Wagner Group and freshly mobilized troops to the front lines to clear the way for its better-trained forces, who step in later, a US official said, [Insider previously reported](#).

Wagner — a private military contractor with close ties to the Kremlin — was designated as a "significant transnational criminal organization" by the US government last week and its global network was [targeted](#) by a slew of sanctions.

The White House said in January that the group had about 10,000 mercenaries and 40,000 former prisoners deployed across Ukraine, where it has joined in Moscow's war efforts.

Earlier this month, [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley](#) [estimated](#) that Russia has lost "well over 100,000" troops in almost a full year of battle, including soldiers from its regular military and also Wagner fighters.



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5 of the biggest surprises of Putin's devastating war in Ukraine

When the Russian leader delivered his televised war declaration on February 24, sending his troops forward to carry out a large-scale invasion, he anticipated that Kyiv [would fall](#) in a matter of days — a grave assessment [echoed](#) by US and Western intelligence, as well as many think tank experts and analysts.

More than 10 months later, the city of nearly 3 million people remains in Ukrainian hands. The country's forces have managed to not only weather Moscow's invasion on multiple fronts, but have even pushed Russian troops back in some areas, liberating thousands of square miles of territory that had fallen to Russian troops early in the war.

US officials have declared Putin's war efforts in Ukraine a "failure." That said, there is still no end in sight for the fight for this devastating conflict that has caused hundreds of thousands of casualties and left Ukrainian cities in ruins.

The poor performance of the Russian military has surprised Putin and other observers, but it's only one of several unexpected twists in the past 10 months of war. Here are some other unforeseen moments.



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The way Russia invaded and the failures that came with it

The earliest — and perhaps biggest — surprise was the way that Russia carried out its invasion of Ukraine.

Seeming to overestimate the strength of his armed forces and underestimate the will of Ukraine to resist, Putin — and some Western intelligence — expected Kyiv would not be able to hold out more than a few days.

Miscalculations by Russian leadership coupled with the poor communication of objectives to officers and troops tasked with fighting the war, however, led to an array of Russian mistakes and blunders during the early days of the war, like units finding themselves isolated or struggling with substantial logistical problems.

Russian forces were expected to move in large groups consisting of soldiers, armor, and artillery, conducting combined arms warfare with air support and other assets, but that didn't happen.

"We would have thought that they would have done a much more deliberate, well-thought-through operation. That is not what they did," Jeffrey Edmonds, a Russia expert at the Center for Naval Analyses and former CIA military analyst, told Insider, explaining that Russia didn't lead with a massive air campaign and its soldiers were basically just told to drive to Kyiv.

"That's not the way we at all thought that they would invade," he said.



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Ukraine's ability to not only stop the Russians but drive them back

Heading into the war, Russia greatly underestimated the will of the Ukrainian people to defend their homeland and the strength and combat capability of the country's military.

"Another surprise was the level of capability of the Ukrainians to defend against the invasion, despite Russian screw ups," Edmonds said. "And that's continued throughout."

Ukraine managed to not only protect Kyiv against the advancing Russian troops, but it even managed to force their retreat from the capital region after just a few weeks. Beyond that, Ukrainian troops have since managed to liberate thousands of square miles of territory from Russian occupation during various counteroffensives along the war's northeastern and southern fronts.

One significant achievement was the recent [liberation](#) of Kherson. This southern city was the first major city captured by Putin's forces and the only regional capital

Russian troops had managed to seize. It was a big early war win for Russia, but it was unable to hold it.

The weapons Ukraine had to fight the war and the way they were used on the battlefield have made a tremendous difference.

Edmonds said the effectiveness of US-provided High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), and Ukraine's ability to integrate [these weapons](#) into its arsenal, were unexpected. These rocket launchers were much-sought-after by Ukraine, and quickly became celebrated among the country's armed forces and its top officials for the damage they could deliver to Russian forces.



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The Kharkiv counteroffensive that hit in the northeast as everyone was looking south. After months of fighting in a grinding and slow-moving conflict in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, Kyiv's forces launched two major counteroffensives along the war's northeastern and southern fronts.

Only the southern offensive to retake Kherson had been expected, as Ukraine had been telegraphing that one for months. As Russian troops moved to defend along the southern front, Ukrainian forces suddenly hit hard from unexpected direction.

Ukraine's northeastern counteroffensive, which was focused in the Kharkiv region, began in late summer and featured a blitz-style push on Russian positions. The advance quickly turned into a rout that forced Russian troops to abandon [massive amounts of weaponry](#) and saw Ukraine liberate huge chunks of land.

Edmonds said the Kharkiv counteroffensive was a "big surprise" to everyone, including the Ukrainians, especially considering the "extent and speed" of Ukraine's advances.

Ukraine has "shown a remarkable ability to take advantages of opportunities that present themselves on the battlefield, and the current counteroffensive in Kharkiv is no exception to that," Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder said in mid-September.



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Explosive attacks behind Russian lines that stirred instability and fear at rear positions

Another unexpected aspect of the war in Ukraine has been the number of attacks far behind the line in Russian-controlled territory. There have been attacks in occupied areas like the Crimean peninsula but also in Russia.

*Earlier this month, a handful of Russian bases — two of them located hundreds of miles from the Ukraine border — were **rocked by explosions**. The attacks were reportedly the result of **drones launched** from Ukrainian territory, though Kyiv denied involvement.*

*The Russian defense ministry blamed the attacks on Soviet-era drones. Although there was some speculation on the type, it is unclear. That Russian bases could be targeted so deep within the country raised eyebrows, as it pointed to a **major force protection failure** and a longer reach than expected for Ukraine.*

"I don't think anybody foresaw them having UAV capability that could reach into Russia and attack strategic air bases," Edmonds said.

And those strikes were not isolated instances. A few weeks prior, Ukraine appeared to attack Russia's naval forces at southern Crimea's [Sevastopol](#) using unmanned surface vehicles (USVs) and UAVs.

Although the use of drones throughout this conflict has not been a surprise, Edmonds said that "some of the ways in which they've been used, and the success of the operations with them, have been somewhat surprising."



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The extent of Western support for Ukraine

Immediately after Russia's February 24 invasion, Western countries wasted no time in banding together to condemn Putin for launching the attack — a response that the Russian leader did not anticipate, at least not at the level seen throughout the war.

Ten months into this conflict, countries from NATO and the European Union have since stayed relatively unified in their support for Ukraine, providing military and humanitarian aid while also slapping round after round of sanctions on Russia.

Putin's miscalculations on the strength of a united Western response, meanwhile, have opened the door to NATO expansion, something he has historically been [strongly against](#). The war has even led some countries — like Germany and Switzerland — to [reverse](#) various military, foreign, and financial policies.

"I think both the US response and the European solidarity on [the war] were surprising to everybody." Edmonds said. "I just think there's this up-welling feeling of like, this just isn't acceptable."

For now, the war continues with no clear immediate off ramp. Despite significant setbacks for Russia in this conflict, Moscow has signaled that it intends to continue its

*fight. Putin himself has said this will be a **long process**, and Ukraine is **bracing for the possibility** of new Russian offensives in the new year.*