

Welcome to the Restless Politics with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And today we have a very special guest, which is Richard Engel.

So Richard and I have known each other for some years, but most recently we bumped into each other on another airplane and he had just come back from an extraordinary series of meetings and encounters.

As we've been following the figure of pregosion, pregosion just for mindlessness is of course the head of the Wagner group, the man that recently led a mutiny against Vladimir Putin.

And Richard had been bringing this documentary together over a couple of years, following the story through he was in Syria, he was in the Central African Republic, going to Ukraine and expecting to bring it out in the autumn and was beginning to worry that people weren't really going to be that interested in who pregosion was or who the Wagner group was when suddenly this whole story broke and we're very lucky to have Richard with us today because I don't know anyone who knows more about pregosion.

So thank you, Richard, for joining us.

It's a real pleasure.

Thank you very much.

It was extraordinary.

I've been covering pregosion following this guy who's first was in the shadows and then burst into sort of the public domain in the during the latest war in Ukraine and we were working on it and we've been in Africa and we had the material and we're starting to go through it and process it and write it.

And then suddenly we look around and he's crossed the border from Ukraine into Russia has been on the attack and they're marching toward Moscow and we all look and said, OK, well, this has just changed.

This is real.

We got to get this out immediately.

So we crashed together.

We had the material in a lot of the material already and suddenly became immensely timely.

So it's just just coincidence would have it.

You know, we were following this guy because we thought he was an interesting and important and he had an important network.

So Richard, you're a long term foreign correspondent with NBC and this has already gone out on NBC and we're going to put this interview out when it goes out online so that our listeners all over the place can see it.

You very kindly sent us a link.

So I got up very, very early to watch it.

How on earth has this happened that this guy and this set of mercenaries that he's kind of dragged around from here than everywhere, they would become so powerful in so many different places.

So what's your answer to that?

How has this happened?

I think you need to understand the nature of the Russian state and the nature of the Russian state as it was described to me by many people who have spent their years, but their careers

writing about it and thinking about it and going there.

And I've spent quite a bit of time in Russia as well over the years as a mafia state where you have Vladimir Putin at the center of a syndicate, the Godfather, some people called him.

So most people imagine a state or a company where you have the boss and then all the other people are employees of the boss, but in a mafia family it's slightly different.

So you have the Kapaldi Tutikapi, who's the head of all the other heads is literally what that means.

And that's a different kind of power structure than, you know, that you have a CEO of a company and then he has all of his or her team underneath him who get together and follow their orders and try and enact a plan.

When you have a boss of bosses, each one of these families, each one of these syndicates has their own network and their own business and Purgosian was one of them.

He had his own operations and there was a mutually beneficial relationship between Purgosian and Putin.

And Richard, let's take it right back to the start.

So one of the things you talk about is his early life.

And tell us about the first time we noticed him, the crime and being sent off to this penal colony and 10 years he spent in prison.

I was having a complete terrifying and then what he did in prison.

So 10 years of hard labor.

So in go back to, we have to go back to St. Petersburg in the 1980s.

So in the 1980s, everyone remembers this kind of the decline of the Soviet Union.

It would ultimately implode first from the outside and then within 1991, from 89, 91, the whole sort of disruptive period of history as the Soviet Union was collapsing onto itself because of its corruption and inefficiency and the Cold War pressure.

So in the 80s, he's in St. Petersburg, which has been, let's say, you think of it as Chicago in the 1920s.

It's a rough town, lots of gangsters already in the 80s under this declining Soviet Union.

And that's where Purgosian is.

He lives in the city and he's a crook.

He's a criminal.

Some friends get into an armed robbery.

They rob a woman on the streets.

He nearly strangles her to death, takes her belongings, takes her boots and gets arrested.

It does nearly 10 years of hard labor.

But was he known to the police as a crook?

You know what?

I don't know, but I wouldn't be surprised.

But it was this crime that pushed it over.

I don't know how much of a record he had previously, but 10 years is a lot.

But if you nearly kill someone in an unprovoked attack.

So just to cover it.

And that's 10 years in Siberia in a sort of, I mean, this is like the life of Ivan Denisovich.

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Ten tough years, which according to people, biographers or people who had already been looking into him, he likes it.

He gets into it.

He appreciates the work ethic and the discipline.

And he gets out and okay, he's arrested in the very early 80s.

He gets out 81.

What period are we in now?

We're in exactly the collapse of the Soviet Union.

So he gets out of jail after he's been breaking rocks or presumably whatever they're doing in the jail, making radios or whatever hard labor at the time involved.

This penal colony was quite rigorous for its amount of work that they made you do.

He gets out and now in St. Petersburg, which already had this, was already kind of a mafia town, the state is gone.

So the mafia is the only thing left.

So he goes into business and he grows this one hot dog stand into it mysteriously gets into a chain of restaurants very quickly in prime locations in the nicest sort of real estate spots in St. Petersburg.

So he quickly has this empire.

So he's certainly a connected guy and knows how to operate in this world of St. Petersburg that was a gangster town before and now very much so.

There's a clip in the documentary that I almost jumped out of my seat because I've seen the pictures of Prugosian serving food to George Bush, but then suddenly I see my old boss Tony Blair there as well.

And I'm trying to think when was that was that in St. Petersburg because I do remember going to St. Petersburg and having dinners there at the summits that were going on there.

Something, God, did I miss this guy?

So a lot of people miss this guy.

He was very discreet.

He was quiet.

He was in the background.

Sometimes he's described as Putin's chef.

He's not a chef.

He doesn't, I mean, maybe knows how to make an omelet or something, but he's not a cook.

He doesn't wear the white jacket and make food.

He's a restaurateur.

He's a caterer.

And it is in St. Petersburg in this time when he and Putin come into contact because he's got the nicest restaurants and that becomes Putin's hangout as Putin is a rising star.

And for listeners and people who have a chance to watch this amazing documentary, what Alice is referring to is that you see again and again, people like George W. Bush and Tony Blair sitting down at the table to have these formal state dinners.

That's not in St. Petersburg.

So you have to jump ahead.

So St. Petersburg they meet.

Putin is a advisor to the mayor.

He's a mid-level intelligence officer, KGB, KGB later converts to the FSB.

And had Putin not had this spectacular rise, we'd never heard of Progression.

We own a bunch of restaurants in St. Petersburg.

He wasn't an oligarch in the sense that we've understood the oligarchs, the Berezovsky's and these guys.

He wasn't like that.

He was more like a low-level guy who got himself into Putin.

I think Putin's system is more less like when you think of oligarch, it gives the idea of a business tycoon.

And you had business tycoons, but then you had an inner circle of fixers.

So to go back to the mafia analogy, which was used to me time and time again, is you have the boss of bosses and then each guy has his own syndicate.

So I don't want to cast aspersions, but if this was the deal, I'm the boss of bosses.

Okay, Rory, you've got your own family.

And Rory, you've got your own businesses, some legitimate and some illegitimate, illegal.

And you run that and that money goes to you and you, Alistair, have your own separate syndicate.

So your rivals, you're not all employees of me and then you earn for yourself and I make sure that you all get top cover and that you don't fight among yourselves.

But then something extraordinary happens.

2000, Putin becomes president.

So all of these people are now hyper empowered because now I have super connections.

All of you can be useful to me if I ever ask you a favor and then he becomes the caterer.

So once he becomes president, now as I go back to your question, where all those extraordinary pictures were, he became the official caterer for the armed forces.

He became the caterer for the Kremlin.

He became, he rose up from someone who was restaurants running the hangout where these guys were to now he's the official state caterer, which is a very lucrative job.

Some very reminiscent, I think, of what happens in medieval courts as well.

So Henry VIII has this figure, Thomas Cromwell, who's basically a sort of working class fixer who is so reliable, he then gets things done for him in a whole series of different areas that eventually he makes him, you know, Lord Chancellor of England.

So Progression, you get the sense he's trusted to run a good meal.

He's trusted to make sure that Tony Blair sat properly, that the wine's coming, the food's coming, but Putin is also relying on him to do many other things.

So he's beginning to develop a small security company.

He's running his chain of restaurants and the line between public procurement, private business activity is very, very blurred, you know, how exactly did he get this contract?

And that means just to jump you forward in the story, when Putin is then looking for a chance for somebody to help him in an incredible context, which is Syria, he turns to this guy who he thinks is a kind of reliable fixer.

Yes.

So he's now a contractor, if you will, who's got his own business network.

And first he relies on them for a variety of things.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 152. The Power of Prigozhin

So Progression has this network of businesses, one of them is catering.

He also forms a private security company called Wagner.

And he wants, you know, imagine guys, bodyguard services, big guys, earpieces, khaki shirts, and he's going to use them to provide security services, but they don't really have a purpose yet.

They start getting used in Ukraine after the takeover of Crimea and Donbass, don't have a very significant role.

They're a player among players there, but they start to get some military experience.

And then 2015, if you remember what Syria was like in 2015, so mess, it was total chaos.

You had ISIS, you had a coalition of rebel groups backed by different countries, the United States, the UK, everybody seemed to, the Arab states were backing them.

People didn't know exactly who they were backing, some of these rebel groups would get backed and then collapse and join sides.

It was one of the most chaotic periods of conflicts that I've ever covered.

And Richard, let's just bring in the personal there for a second before we jump back to Progression.

You were in and out of that period.

What are your memories of what it felt like on the ground?

What was it like for the Syrian people?

What were the expectations?

Did people think that Bashar al-Assad's regime was going to collapse?

What was your feeling at the time?

Very much so.

It was very, very chaotic.

It was one of the strangest periods that I've covered.

I was kidnapped in Syria during this period.

There were so many different factions that couldn't necessarily be trusted and there were lots of interplay, you know, you'd have one faction and then they would change sides and then they would rename themselves and some were backed by the government and then they'd bring in Islamists and then they would fight among themselves.

And Bashar al-Assad was barely clinging to power and is at this stage he reaches out to Russia for help.

And Assad goes to Moscow and says, please, I need help and Bashar al-Assad is clinging for power and Putin says, yes, I back my allies, I don't turn my back unlike the Americans, unlike these other people who abandoned their allies, not me.

But he doesn't want to get bogged down like other countries have done in Iraq.

So the United States and the UK and the whole coalition got stuck in Iraq.

So he sends warplanes to bomb Assad's targets.

But instead of sending ground troops, Progression, we've got a mission for you.

Take this Wagner force and go there and prop up the Assad regime and he's got an incentive.

At that stage, the soldiers that Progression has with him, where are they coming from?

And who's paying for them?

Who's paying for them?

I'll get to in a second because effectively they pay themselves.

By thieving and raiding land and all that stuff.

By oil, and this is a document we come across that Pregosian was given a 25% cut of oil and gas facilities that he was able to take control of.

So nominally to reclaim them for the Syrian government and hey, if you get to reclaim them from the government, from these rebel groups or ISIS or whatever, you get a 25% cut.

Richard, just again, you're being very modest about yourself from this whole story because you're telling the story of Pregosian.

But just for listeners, Richard is the chief foreign correspondent for NBC.

He had covered the Iraq war.

He was tear gassed during the Arab Spring in Cairo.

He speaks good Arabic and you were kidnapped in Syria.

You escaped after five days.

So you were right in the heart of all this.

When did you personally first start hearing rumors about Russian mercenaries or the Wagner group?

Well, hold on.

Before that, Richard, we've just seen there, we've got a little divergence in our pockets.

I say Wagner.

He says Wagner.

Probably Wagner with a V.

Yeah.

And where did it come from?

It didn't come from the composer exactly.

It was the nickname of one of the sort of co-founders of the group with Pregosian.

It was his call sign.

And that, I assume, came from Wagner, the composer.

So it's kind of of the composer, but one degree separated.

It was the call sign of some of the others.

Okay.

So just to be clear though, Roy, from now on in, you've introduced Richard as the expert on this guy, shall we say Wagner, okay?

I don't think Pregosian's going to care right now.

He has big fish to fry at the moment.

But so they set up this operation in Syria and Syria really becomes the model.

You go in, you prop up the dictator and you take what you want and take what you can get.

And how many truths did he have with him at that time?

And you asked earlier where they come from.

So I can give you an anecdote because I spoke with one of the guys who was early, an early recruit and he was sort of a typical recruit for Wagner in this period.

And he had, he was an older guy, not old, but certainly an adult, not a kid.

He was in his 40s at the stage.

He had been a soldier, kind of a non-commissioned officer.

He commanded troops, sergeant type level rank.

And he had been in the Soviet army, was good at it, liked it, liked his, you know, his job and commanding men.

Then the Soviet army collapses, so he's got nothing to do.

And in this chaotic period, he, like many other people, start working for low level gangsters and he ends up becoming a bodyguard for some local hoodlum and doesn't particularly like it, ends up murdering someone because that happens all the time.

I mean, these, you know, gangs are killing each other, spends time in jail, three years in jail, gets out, goes to work as a bodyguard for some other hoodlum, doesn't particularly like it.

He's drinking himself to death and Progosian comes and taps on him and said, hey, I need you.

I need you for my, my army.

I'm putting together this private militia group and it's going to be the best of the best.

And this guy said, yes, yes, of course, loves it, loves Progosian.

So it's this, this group of second chances and hard cases who, if they get killed, nobody's going to say anything.

They're from deep in central Russia.

I went deep into central Russia to go to some of their funerals because it was all hush-hush.

And the reason it was convenient for Putin to do it this way is he doesn't have to commit real Russian troops.

He can send these, these nobodies, these has-beens, these hard cases who already get the rules.

So they go there, they fight, they get their money, they get paid, great.

But if they get killed, they get buried somewhere in Russia next to their families and their families don't say anything about it.

And now Rich, we now jump forward.

So to Africa, and we saw you in Syria during the documentary and then you moved on to the Central African Republic where you interviewed the leader of the Central African Republic.

Tell us what the Wagner group was then doing in the Central African Republic and then eventually in Mali, Mozambique, Burkina Faso.

Give us a sense of that and give us a sense of the politics going on there.

So Syria, even though there was one horrific battle where Progosian totally overestimated his own strength and he tries to take an oil facility, oil and gas facility in Syria and doesn't realize that there's some very elite, or realizes but underestimates some, that there's these very elite American special forces on this base and gets totally decimated.

So in Syria, he's still learning, getting combat experience with mistakes along the way, including this one incident when about 300 of his men were just an allied local Syrian militia were totally decimated by the Americans.

And Richard, this was the first time that US troops have been fighting Russians since Vietnam?

Yes.

So just to finish the Syria story, he tries to attack this base because they had this incentive 25% of any oil and gas so that you can take his yours, pay yourself.

He goes after this one base, whoops, there's a small contingent of very elite, very well

armed, very angry American special troops who don't like to be attacked by some mercenaries and wipes them out.

So he's getting better through errors in Syria.

After Syria, just to answer your question to Africa, he's kind of now established a model.

So the president of the Central African Republic, Faustin Tuadera, his country is facing terrible civil war.

Imagine Syria kind of situation, terrible civil war, the rebels are at the gates of the city and he controls, according to him and his advisors, 20% of the country, the rebels control 80%.

And nobody's going to help, nobody wants to help him.

He claims, he told me, the president told me and others, he went around, he's asking for help.

Nobody want, nobody cares.

Putin says, I will help you.

That's who we are.

We help allies, we help people in need.

Same deal.

He doesn't want to send ground troops to some Central African nation.

He sends Wagner and Wagner does a good job, good job from his perspective, he kills lots of rebels, secures the capital, flips it.

So government now has 80%, the rebels still have 20%.

But what does he do?

He takes all the gold and mine sites over and we have satellite imagery that showed before and after what it was like when the Wagner people showed up, how they abused the locals in order to get them to run away from these mine sites.

And there's no foreign troops there, so it's relatively more easy.

So now he's got a country and he takes effective control of the country with the governments inviting, having invited him in.

But Richard, to do that, to go in where the government is telling you, we need to help here and we've lost control of 80% of our own country, to flip that, he must have a military structure and military numbers that maybe we don't even countenance as being a mercenary army.

It's not so much, you know, we're not talking tens of thousands, we're talking a few thousand, hundreds or a few thousand.

And they operate there as trainers and advisors.

So what they do in the Central African Republic is they go in and then they train and work with the local army.

So they have extra, extra manpower from the local militia and the local army.

So he's getting good people, he's getting good military operatives.

Well, clearly they weren't that good, they'd lost 80% of the country.

But he has, he has, they have clay, they have people who they can work with.

I think what it means is that his people are good.

I mean, obviously the Central African army, we're not, we're not doing that well.

They're getting, they're getting better.

Right.

They're learning.

By now, they're starting to become real because they fought in Syria and actually they start recruiting locally.

They take some Syrians with them and they enforce discipline with savage brutality.

There was a deserter in Syria, a man named Hamdi Buta and he deserted from the force because even in Syria, they worked with Syrians.

That's why you don't need as many numbers of them because you send advisors 15, 20, 30 and then they work with perhaps a hundred Syrian advisors and command work over them so they become what's called a force multiplier to use military jargon.

Same kind of, of model in Africa, they go in, they, they use the resources, the very few resources that this very poor army can provide in terms of vehicles and trucks and things and they bring in more equipment and they fight off the rebels and the rebels are also very poorly armed.

So they have a technological superiority and they have some combat experience from, from other conflicts.

Richard, we'll just take a quick break and we'll be back in a second.

There were a couple of moments in that Central African Republic apart that really kind of struck with me.

The first was very moving interview with the widow of a guy who'd been a miner who'd be effectively wiped out because they wanted the locals out of the way so they could raid all the, I think it was gold at the time.

Gold mine, yeah.

Right.

And the second thing that really struck me was the, the interview you did with the president who it seemed to me completely changed his body language and his demeanor, wouldn't even bring himself to use the word Wagner was almost, I felt, am I right in thinking he was maybe a little bit scared of the Wagner group at this point?

Well, I think it was and his name is President Faustin Archange Touadéra and I was wondering if he had made a deal with the devil.

He Faustin Touadéra is his name.

So he brought in Wagner forces to prop up his government and now they are his bodyguard services.

So when I went to go see him, you have to go through Wagner as part of the security.

They were all over the palace.

His national security advisor is a Wagner Russian guy.

The embassy there, according to diplomats, they're all populated with Wagner.

So you invited them in.

Yes, they fought back the rebels and now they keep you in power, but they have dominance in the country.

And the widow, what did you think of her?

So widow was a person that she had lived in these mines.

So you have to think of, this is an incredibly poor country.

Central Africa, next to the DCR, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and it's heavily forested and they have many, many golden diamond mines, artisanal mines dug by hand. And imagine just big pits, honeycombed kind of pits where very wet, you have people digging the mines and then sifting for gold.

Wagner wants to take them over under the guise of fighting rebels.

So they come in, they arrive in their technicals and this woman was there and describes how the Wagner mercenaries show up.

They have a piece of paper that says, this land is now ours, it was given to us by the government in order to protect it.

This is our area and the locals don't want to leave.

And according to her account, they kill her husband and seven other people, bury them in a grave to terrify people.

So then they leave and they take over and that that was a pattern.

We heard, you know, we reviewed dozens of accounts of similar atrocities where they would move in, beat or kill a couple of examples, and then in order to get the people to run away and then they take over the site.

And Richard, I mean, it's a very, very sinister story, isn't it?

Because when it suits Putin, he will claim credit for the Wagner group.

So there will be connections with the embassies.

He will be saying to the president, I'm sending my guys.

And then when it suits him, he can distance himself from them and say, they're nothing to do with me.

They're just a private company.

They're a bunch of mercenaries.

That's the beauty of the arrangement, exactly.

It allows him to do much more brutal, radical things than if he was sending formal Russian soldiers in on the ground.

But it must also have been dangerous for you.

I mean, three Russian journalists were killed in the Central African Republic.

You're in the Central African Republic.

And at this stage, you try to reach out directly to Progosian for an interview and you're basically saying to him, would you care to comment on the fact that your men are committing atrocities that you're against the boss and this and that and the other?

I mean, were you not, sorry, this is a little, maybe, unfettered, but you're not a little bit scared trying to ask Progosian for an interview.

It was a very good voice note he sent about you.

Yes.

Was he threatening to rip out your Adam's apple?

I couldn't quite understand it.

Yes, I think he was.

It was certainly to crush it, if not rip it out, but he, so you, you know, we did a standard writer of reply, you know?

So we're there and we had tried to meet the Russian officials locally, openly.

You know, we're driving around and we go to the, there's a Russia house there and knock

on the door.

We'd interviewed the president.

We interviewed the president's advisor.

We're doing our jobs openly in the Central African Republic, hopefully that, you know, we're not going to get killed there.

Yes, three Russian journalists got killed for basically doing the same thing.

And we, we do our stories so far, no, no direct harassment or threats, although we see the Wagner people all around and I'm sure they were following us and we, they were staying in our hotel and they were walking around and I, you just see them and they've drive around in cars with no license plates, balaclavas up to their, up to their noses and, you know, kind of hard stairs.

And it's no secret that they're there in the Central African Republic.

There's a statue to Wagner in the middle of the city with life-size soldiers.

They even made a movie about themselves.

I went and saw the movie.

They released a movie about Wagner and their heroics in, in the country and they showed it to the local people to sort of prop themselves up.

So we sent a, a right to reply.

Okay.

Supergozen, we, we have these questions.

Would you like to answer?

How do you respond to comments and can you tell us more about your operations?

And he writes back quite promptly with a voice note saying, you know enough about our operations based on the people you've spoken to and I'll only answer you and if your questions are less provocative and if you mean to come in, I'm paraphrasing here, but it was something like this, but if you mean to just insult me and spit in my face, then I suggest you come a little closer and see if it's your Adam's apple that I'm squeezing or somebody else's.

And I was like, wow, that's quite a right to reply.

You know, normally you just get no comment or you get nothing.

Yeah.

And also he gave you a very, very dramatic piece of graphic for the, for the documentary.

This was all before this was just, this was literally a few weeks before his move on Moscow.

So that's why when he starts moving on Moscow, we're like, oh my gosh, we have all this material.

The guy just threatened to rip my throat out.

We got to put this together quickly.

But the reason he's in Ukraine is he goes into Ukraine is because Putin has seen him be an effective supplier of, you know, food and drink to the great and the good, seen him do other stuff, no doubt, then done pretty well in Syria, then done well in the C.A.R. And then he needs him in, in Ukraine.

He also had a bot farm.

This is a guy, he's the Swiss army night of special operations between Syria and Central African Republic is 2016 election.

He already had this guy had all kinds of operations.

He also had a small bot farm, a bot farm disinformation thing that he was using to attack Russian dissidents and discredit Russian, you know, Kremlin critics.

And then suddenly, right before the 2016 election, that bot farm expands and shifts and goes after the Hillary Clinton props up Donald Trump says all kinds of wonderful things about him spreads memes around the Internet.

And that's when he sort of burst out of the shadows because there were so many investigations in the United States.

And you know, who is this guy, Putin's chef?

Now he's running a disinformation campaign.

And then Trump gets elected.

It's impossible to know if all those ads and memes and things swayed voters minds.

But in Moscow, they were certainly happy with the results.

There's a bit in the film where you've got him, I think it's him and some other people sort of drinking champagne.

That was a viewing party in Moscow.

Yeah, that.

So, but hold on, was that them watching the Trump?

Yes, yes, it was cutting back and forth to people in Moscow celebrating the Trump win and drinking champagne.

What's your having looked at it?

What's your own assessment?

I mean, I think that, you know, we interviewed Hillary Clinton for the podcast a while back.

I was in Russia at the time.

They were very happy.

But what was your assessment as to whether actually the extent of the effect that it did have?

I noticed, for example, when you talked about the Bakhmut, I guess you'd call it the Massacro, it looks horrific, but you were also making the point that militarily, it wasn't that significant.

It was like a massive marketing thing for Wagner.

Now, was the the bot farm, the troll farm, was there something similar in that that he just sort of wants the world to think that he's amazing and a genius or was he actually influencing that election?

It's sort of one of these unknowables.

He did this campaign that was against Hillary Clinton.

It was stirring the pot of pushing the buttons in the United States about latent racism and issues that are sensitive to Americans.

And he was attacking Hillary Clinton and he was propping up Trump.

Did that sway the vote?

I don't know.

It's hard to know.

You'd have to ask any individual voter why they voted for Trump.

And it's probably there's no single causality factor for anything in the world.

But it probably didn't didn't hurt.

And then, but going ahead.
So now he's gone from success to success to success.
He's the apple of Putin's eye, the perception of success, at least.
And now we're up to two thousand twenty two.
So if you're a pregosion, you're you've everything you've done is sort of worked out.
You've made money in the process.
You've helped out the boss.
The other members, other kind of similar people to you are quite jealous because they don't, you know, nobody likes a rising star.
But then everything changes with this decision to invade Ukraine in an open conventional war in two thousand twenty two.
And then it goes badly.
That's the shocking part for Putin, certainly.
He, his armies have been told how you're going to march in.
It'll be easy and you'll be in Kiev in days and they'll be celebrating.
They brought dress uniforms with them and it goes badly.
They get that Ukrainians are fighting back.
The Russian vehicles barely have enough gas to get to Kiev.
They break down.
They don't have food.
There's no logistics.
The different commands, the forces attacking from the north aren't communicating the ones that are coming from the east.
And there's another division going to the south.
They're not talking to each other.
Just an absolute catastrophe.
So guess what happens later on in the war?
And you call for a pregosion, but this is a very different.
Now he's asking him to radically transform Wagner
because Wagner until now, as we've been talking about had hundreds,
maybe a couple of thousand guys in it, not a huge army.
Putin's now asking him to convert this small paramilitary group
into a division of frontline crack soldiers, shock troops.
And you need tens of thousands of people to do that.
And that's heavy weapons and uniforms and logistics.
You need to make them into an army and that he'd never done before.
So what does he do?
What's the first thing you would need?
Men. So Putin authorizes him to go empty the prisons.
And whether these famous pictures of him going at the jails,
offering all these convicts, he says, I have been authorized to give you a deal.
And don't forget, he's himself an ex-con.
He knows how to talk to these people and says, I will give you a deal.
You're going to I'm going to send you into hard combat.

You might not survive.
Not all of you are going to survive.
We are only looking for frontline troops.
But if you survive six months, you're free and you have five minutes to decide.
Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.
So he leaves.
He's like, when I'm leaving, I'm leaving.
He gets tens of thousands of people who who who join up for this.
Some of them hope that they could escape.
They thought we'll go to Ukraine and we'll just get in the battlefield.
We'll be among the trees and we'll run away.
They have very strict discipline.
This ledge hammer is used on, you know, the deserters.
They're shot in the back.
If they try and leave, just executed or shot from the troops behind them.
Really tough.
And you can imagine how the military feels now.
The military is losing the war.
And this guy has now been tapped by Putin to raise an army and do
what the army has been unable to do, which is bring victory and win.
Win this big city or two and win where the army is failing.
Richard, this is the most wonderful thing.
And we could keep going for hours, but I want to accelerate.
You had a little bit towards the end.
So Alastair and I found ourselves waking up on a Saturday morning and
dealing with the fact that Purgotian suddenly had decided to turn around.
And instead of advancing towards the Ukrainian troops, was leading
the Wagner group up towards Moscow.
And in fact, was getting surprisingly close, surprisingly quickly.
So just bring us up to date on what on earth was happening there.
So he picks Bahmut, the city of Bahmut, which is not a particularly strategic city.
Yeah. Why did he do that?
It's because he needed to show victory.
And it was a place where he could he could take the city.
Russian troops have been struggling to take other cities around there.
So we're going to take this Bahmut and I'm going to deliver you a victory.
It could have been almost any city.
It was the idea, I'm going to take a target and I'm going to do something.
I'm going to deliver a victory that is clear and obvious to the Kremlin.
So he picks Bahmut, I don't want to say arbitrarily, but it's not a particularly
it doesn't control any terrain, doesn't control any territory.
It's just a small city among many cities in Eastern Ukraine, not far from the Russian border.
And he pours everything he has at this city.
And in devastating the city in the process, I was in Bahmut.

It was horrendous shells coming down at left, right, center, horrendous fighting.
And the generals who were jealous that he was given this mission in the first place
hate the fact that he's making progress in the city.
Every bomb that he drops, every person that he sends running out of the city
is a show of his power and that he's doing at great, horrible,
collective punishment cost to this, to this, you know, civilian city
is a symbol of his superiority over the military.
So what are the military start doing according to him?
And this has been verified by numerous intelligence agencies.
They start to undercut him.
They stop giving him ammo because he's now just turned into an army, which he never was.
So he's dependent on the military for the supply chain for artillery
and heavy weapons and tanks.
He doesn't have any of this kind of stuff.
So the military is his supply chain.
So the military starts cutting off his supply chain and he still wins.
He still takes the city and then after he takes the city,
this is when he loses it with Shoigu and Garazimov, the defense minister
and the army chief, and he says that he's starting to become vocal
and he's issuing these threats.
You people are the worst in the world.
You're traitors, you're cutting off my men.
He's screaming at them and he's getting more and more furious, which is
just was just fascinating to watch this man get more and more
outrageously angry.
He's yes, he's happy to send his men into battle, but he doesn't want them to be betrayed.
And do you think Putin is like he was with the with the oligarch phase?
Is he sitting at the top of this playing him off against Shoigu and Garazimov?
It's hard to know, you know, the internal Kremlin politics,
but but clearly Putin was allowing this to happen.
Because now when when they start to undercut his supply chain,
very frequently, I don't want to say every day, but every few days
Purgosin is issuing these angry statements and getting away with it.
So don't forget how Putin was so angry with his military
for having failed in the war thus far.
There's several army chiefs who've been changed.
So Putin has made the his military very nervous because
within months of failure, you're sacked and somebody else.
Now he's brought in his special Mr. Fixit on top of that.
So the military is already nervous on edge, jealous
and then then to add the final insult to injury
after he wins this city at the cost of flattening it.
The the generals come in and this is according to Purgosin's own account
because he starts to explain it and he says they say to him,

thank you very much, job well done, you're done.
Disbanding Wagner as the military unit,
your troops can they're going to be absorbed into the ranks of the Russian military.
And you as a as a Wagner no longer have an army.
And he loses it that these people have been cutting him off
for the end of the knees now move in to disband his force
and take away his troops.
And the next thing we know he's marching first to Rostov,
which is the headquarters of the army that is, you know, been screwing him over
and then marches up to Moscow and then stops mysteriously.
So Richard, he goes crazy.
He marches basically on Moscow and then he comes to a grinding halt.
Yes, one of the great mysteries.
And because this isn't over yet, he marches halfway to Moscow.
He takes Rostov and then he stops.
There's a fight along the way.
It's some Russian aircraft are shot down.
And then he suddenly stops and says, this is a deal.
I'm going to go to Belarus and I'm stopping because I never meant to threaten the state.
I'm paraphrasing Purgosin.
I was really just trying to show that I wanted these generals removed
and that they're totally incompetent, but my message has been delivered.
And now I'm withdrawing and he leaves Rostov and he's cheered.
Presumably Richard, he was talking to Lukashenko in Belarus
because Lukashenko was absolutely doing Putin's bidding.
It was he wasn't actually a negotiator, was he?
This is all when we're starting now to enter into speculation.
I know what happened to him and I watched this sort of evolution
of Purgosian from violent petty criminal to now army chief of this
criminal army that has destroyed a city and then got undercut and lost his mind.
And then he marches into the into Russia and then stops.
And I don't know why he stopped.
I don't know where he went.
So he then supposedly went to Belarus.
But then the Lukashenko of Belarus says he was never there.
The latest rumors are he's in St. Petersburg.
I don't know. It's an evolving story.
So what's going to happen to him?
What's going to happen to his army?
What's going to happen to his Africa empire?
And I think, frankly, that's what Putin is trying to figure out.
Because if you kill the guy, OK, what are you going to do with his?
His his tens of thousands of troops who are going to be angry.
And by the way, Putin needs troops right now because he's still fighting a war.

The Ukrainians are in the midst of an offensive.
They're getting more and more weapons.
So what is he going to do with these men?
So I think he's trying to figure out how to.
What's the next step for him?
But he's been he's been wounded.
Certainly he's been wounded.
So has it damaged them both?
Putin and Prigodan both weakened by this
or is Putin feeling a little bit stronger?
This is where we're entering into what's the next phase.
And what my my guess, my estimate of how this plays out
is he still has these twenty five thousand fighters.
Putin can't just take these people and shoot them all.
They're war heroes to a degree.
The Russian people would be outraged by that.
Difficult to fold them into the ranks of the Russian military
because they don't like the Russian military.
They're still loyal to Prigodan.
The Russian military.
What are they wouldn't I don't think use them as troops
because when they put them in as bottle washes or something like that,
folding laundry and cooks, I think they would be less useful.
You have twenty five thousand crack battle-hardened troops.
If you're Putin, you would send them back into combat.
Because if they get killed, well, at least they were fighting on the battlefield.
And maybe they took some pressure off the army
and and maybe a Prigodan is offered this chance
to sort of redeem himself through combat.
And then what happens to him?
I don't know. A lot of a lot of people stood up to Putin, you know, don't last too long.
Well, Richard, this has been the most amazing thing.
I mean, there's so many things that we still have to get into.
And we we may have to return to this with another conversation, another chapter.
But thank you, it is extraordinary.
And I think it's difficult to convey to the listeners
just how much intimate experience you bring to this.
Being on the front line in Bakhmut, being in Syria,
being in the Central African Republic, being personally threatened by this man
and the incredible insight that this gives us into the nature of Putin's regime.
I mean, people often talk about it being a gangster state,
but to literally see a violent criminal
through ten years and penal servitude setting up a chain of restaurants
and ending up taking gold mines, oil fields,

forming his own entire division, basically, of the Russian army and then marching on Moscow.
And the question is, why? How did Putin not see it coming?
Remember, Putin, what have we seen him for COVID?
The end of long, long tables in isolation.
So if you're the boss of bosses, what do you have to do?
You got to watch your own families.
You got to watch the insiders.
And I think it seems like maybe you took his eye off the ball.
Well, listen, maybe if Rory and I do another emergency podcast on pregosin in Putin, we'll get you, we'll get you back on.
But thanks for giving me so much time and we'll put the film out.
And I think I learned an awful lot.
I thought I knew a lot about Putin the way he operates, but I learned a lot.
My pleasure. Thanks, you guys. Thanks very much.
Thank you. Appreciate it. Bye bye.
Take care. Bye bye.
So, Rory, Richard Engel, I read before we did it,
I read the list of awards that he's won in his time.
I think he's going to add to those.
I think it was extraordinary.
What maybe he didn't bring across totally.
But I spent a couple of days with him and that was in the middle of that.
It's how difficult he found it to get NBC to commission it in the first place.
I mean, the editors were like, who the hell is this guy, pregosin?
Why are you spending all this money going to the Central African Republic and walking around Syria and all the Ukraine and all this stuff?
And they were going to put it out in a very, very small way.
I think in September and then suddenly the whole thing blew up.
And he was like, I've been telling you about
pregosin for the last year and a half and they rushed it all out,
got all this stuff together and got off and we were the only people
I think who got an interview with him as it came out.
So that was also an exclusive that.
And I think he's also I suspect it is one of those films that will get
sold by NBC or around the world, I would have thought,
because this guy has become so central to the what is probably
the most important story in the world at the moment.
The the war in Ukraine.
Anyway, the documentary is now on YouTube and we'll put the link
in the show notes and we'll also put it in our newsletter on Friday
so listeners can have a look.
And there's also a lovely thing that we can share in the newsletter,
which has been an amazing analysis of pregosin's medals.

Somebody's looked at his incredible.
Did you see that on Twitter?
I did. Well, I saw the photograph of his jacket
that was found when they raided his house.
And yeah, he's got a lot of medals.
And somebody's actually gone through them one by one.
You know, sort of the star of the Central African Republic,
the kind of Libyan award, the hero of Russia.
He's quite is he's quite a big figure, though, isn't it?
The other thing that was interesting, the only other thing I really liked
about him about Richard was that he didn't want to talk about things
that of which he didn't have direct personal experience.
He kept saying, well, that would take me into the realms of speculation.
And it's so refreshing for a journalist who's clearly very,
very good at their job and believes that journalism is about going out
there on the ground, but he only really wanted to talk about things
that he had established for himself.
And I really, really liked that.
Yeah, he's also part of this strange group
that you've probably seen a lot of and I've seen a lot of of these foreign
correspondence. I remember in Afghanistan and the early days in Iraq
when I was staying in hotels with journalists, I came into Libya
the day after Tripoli fell. Richard very much part of a group of people
who I've seen pop up all over the world of whom probably the one of the
most famous was a woman called Mary Colvin who was sadly killed
eventually in Syria. But I used to see her with Richard in these different
places, sitting around hotels and Baghdad or in Tripoli.
And one underestimates the incredible risks these people are taking
with their lives. I mean, they're wonderful people to be with.
You jump in a car with them.
They're right at the front line.
They're getting these stories.
But it's it's not funny getting Progosian directly threatening you down
the phone saying he's going to put his hand on your Adam's app.
No, also, we talked before on the podcast about Shamima Begum.
And that was because of the work done by John Lloyd on The Times.
And look, the fact is I sometimes probably go over the top in my
criticisms of the of the UK media because there are still some very,
very, very good journalists.
And but what it's what, you know, what was really good about talking to him
is that that to me was a proper journalist who'd spent a long time
investigating a story, as you say, struck a bit lucky in terms of timing.
But actually is somebody who likes to establish facts for himself
and then communicate them to the world, which is pretty much what news

reporting should be about.

Very good. Well, thank you very much.

Great. Well done for getting him and we'll see you soon.