

Bakhmut: The Epicentre of Fierce Fighting Reminiscent of World War I

Background

Bakhmut a city in Eastern Ukraine, located on the Bakhmutka River, is about 90 kms North of Donetsk. In January 2022, it had an estimated population of 80,000.

Known as Artemivsk, during the Soviet period after the Bolshevik leader Fyodor Sergeyev, or Comrade Artem, it was the site of the 2014 Battle of Artemivsk between Ukraine and the separatist Donetsk People's Republic in 2014. A Ukrainian Special Forces unit with the National Guard fought the separatists who finally retreated in July 2014. The city returned to its original name in 2016 as a result of the decommunisation process.

In October 1941, German troops occupied Artemivsk. On 09 January 1942, the Jews of the city were locked in a 'freezing' cellar for three days without food or water. Though, local residents threw lumps of snow through the windows in an attempt to provide some sort of drinkable water and a few residents risked their lives to rescue some children. On 11-12 January 1942, thousands of Jews were led into a mineshaft in an alabaster mine, where several were shot. The soldiers then bricked up the entrance, suffocating the remaining people trapped inside. The exact number of dead is unclear, however, Soviet documents reported about 3,000, while the German authorities recorded 1,200 victims. The city was eventually liberated by the Red Army on 05 September 1943. This is where to quote Anne Applebaum in 'Gulag' 'the darker side of human nature was visible'.

During the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a key aim was to capture the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. The initial push for Bakhmut was part of an attempt to encircle the Ukrainian forces at the Sievierodonetsk-Lysychansk salient; together with a push from the Lyman direction.

The shelling of Bakhmut commenced over a year ago on 17 May 2022. A few days later on 22 May, after the fall of Popasna, Ukrainian forces reinforced Bakhmut. However, Russian forces managed to advance on the Bakhmut-Lysychansk highway.

Shelling of Bakhmut continued throughout June and in early July, when Russian forces captured all of Luhansk Oblast, the battlefield gravitated towards Bakhmut, and Soledar. Once the Ukrainian forces withdrew from the Vuhlehirska Power Station, and Novoluhanske on 25 July, the Russian forces had a 'small tactical advantage' towards Bakhmut.

The Battle Commences

Russian forces launched massive ground attacks South and South East of Bakhmut and increased airstrikes and shelling of Bakhmut on 01 August and by 04 August, Wagner Group mercenaries managed to break through Ukrainian defences and reach the Eastern outskirts. On 14 August, Ukraine stated Russian forces had achieved 'partial success' near Bakhmut.[\[1\]](#)

The main bridge across Bakhmutka River bisecting the city, was destroyed by a Russian missile strike on 22 September hampering Ukrainian military logistics. Russian forces advanced into the southern and south eastern outskirts of Bakhmut and on 12 October, claimed to have captured Opytne and Ivanhrad. However, a minor counter offensive on 24 October pushed Russian forces from some areas on the Eastern outskirts.[\[2\]](#)

Winter Has It in Its Grip

By the onset of winter in early November, the fighting around Bakhmut had descended into 'trench warfare', with neither side making any significant breakthroughs and hundreds of casualties reported daily amid fierce shelling and artillery duels.^[3]

On 03 December, Ukraine's Eastern Command, described the Bakhmut front as, "The most bloody, cruel and brutal sector ... in the Russian-Ukrainian war so far", adding that the Russians had conducted 261 artillery attacks in the past day alone.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused Russia of 'destroying' Bakhmut, calling it "Another Donbas city that the Russian Army turned into burnt ruins".^[4]

Ukrainian soldiers claimed that front line Russian troops often attacked without much armour support, with Wagner fighters serving as the main assault troops and under-equipped mobiks (recently mobilised Russian recruits) holding defensive positions.^[5]

On 11–13 December, Russian sources claimed that Wagner fighters had breached defenses in East Bakhmut and urban street fighting had begun. Footage then emerged online of trenches in Bakhmut's city centre, showing Ukrainian defenders were preparing for urban combat.

On 18–19 December, Ukrainian forces, including infantry supported by British- Wolfhound Tactical Supply Vehicles, counterattacked and pushed Wagner forces back to the Eastern outskirts amid 'grinding' street clashes.

Meanwhile, heavy shelling and fighting on Bakhmut's outskirts continued as Russian forces continuously attempted to break entrenched Ukrainian positions.

On 26 December, it was reported by Ukraine's Governor of Donetsk, Pavlo Kyrylenko, said over 60 percent of Bakhmut's infrastructure was damaged or destroyed. By early January 2023, the Kyiv Independent remarked that the battle was 'near culmination'.

Fall of Soledar and Encirclement

Following an offensive in early January 2023, Russian forces captured the nearby town of Soledar by 16 January. This helped Russian forces advance to Bakhmut from the North, although they would need to cut off the highway between Siversk and Bakhmut to sever Ukrainian supply lines.

By 22 February, Russian forces encircled Bakhmut from the East, South, and North. On 04 March, the Deputy Mayor reported that while there was street fighting, Russian forces had not taken control of the city while the Chief of the Wagner Group said that the city was largely encircled.

On 07 March, Ukraine withdrew from East of the Bakhmutka River, making the River the separating line between the forces. Soon, the MiG-17 Monument which had become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance, was destroyed by Russian forces. It was however felt that the Wagner Group units were 'taking the lead in fighting', and that the river had become a 'killing zone'.

On 03 April, after taking the Town Hall, Wagner head Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that from a 'legal' point of view, Bakhmut had been taken. He said they controlled more than 80% of the city. On 18 April, Ukrainian General Oleksandr Syrskyi reported that Russia was "turning the city into ruins".

The End Moves

On 01 May, Ukrainian spokesman Serhiy Cherevaty estimated the strength of Russian forces attacking the city to be 25,600 personnel, 65 tanks, 450 armored fighting vehicles, 154 guns and 56 rocket salvo systems.

While Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi said that Ukrainian forces had recaptured some parts of the city after a counter-attack, Prigozhin said that his Wagner Group had advanced some 120 metres in exchange for the loss of some 86 fighters; he complained that there was a shortage of ammunition and threatened to withdraw "because in the absence of ammunition [Wagner personnel are] doomed to perish senselessly."[\[6\]](#)

Though Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov agreed to replace Wagner forces with Chechen units, the ammunition issue was resolved and Wagner forces stayed and on 20 May, Prigozhin claimed the capture of Bakhmut by Wagner forces but Ukrainian forces were still in control of areas of the city. However, Ukrainian forces had withdrawn from the city, except for an 'insignificant' holdout along the highway. Later, the Russian Defense Ministry also claimed that the city had been captured.

Troops and Tactics

Russian assault forces have primarily been composed of Wagner Group, reinforcements from other front lines in Ukraine, and recently mobilized recruits the Ukrainians refer to as mobiks.

Some observers likened Russian tactics to Soviet-style human wave attacks, repeatedly assaulting Ukrainian positions with waves of infantry. It was alleged by Ukrainian soldiers that Wagner used ex-convicts as 'human bait' to discern Ukrainian positions.

Russia also targeted Bakhmut with Iranian made drones. In late January 2023, Russia began supplanting Wagner units with better-trained National Guard of Russia (Rosgvardia) and paratroopers, enabling them to make further advances in the Bakhmut sector.[\[7\]](#)

The Ukrainian defenders consist of a 'mixture of units', consisting initially of the 93rd Mechanized Brigade and the 58th Motorised Brigade, who were later reinforced in order to fill in gaps caused by heavy casualties.

There was a view that while even though Ukrainian Commanders utilised significant resources, their strategy aimed at keeping Russia tied down in Bakhmut, in order to prevent any offensive elsewhere. What is significant is that these troops were equipped and trained by NATO.

Conversely, The New York Times reported that Ukraine's use of well-trained National Guard and infantry units against poorly trained Wagner forces was tying down Ukraine's well-trained units and preventing Ukraine from conducting offensives not only in the present but for the future.[\[8\]](#)

The Larger Picture

One of the issues being deliberated is as to why the Russians chose to go in for attritional warfare tactics rather than manouvre warfare wherein they could have used mechanised forces to cut off the routes of ingress and egress and forced surrender of the Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut.

The answer could lie in the aims set out at the beginning of the invasion by President Putin when he said he wanted to 'demilitarise Ukraine'. Hence, these meat grinder tactics of forcing the Ukrainian troops to enter certain areas where they were then destroyed in detail in a long slugging match.

Though, the fighting is attributed to the Wagner Group, it was not without significant Russian support in terms of artillery, air, intelligence and of course logistics. As a result, there are reports which state that 30,000 Troops defeated over 100,000 Ukrainian troops who suffered over 70% casualties. The question remains as to whether the Ukrainian's overplayed their hand and fell for the bait and the Russians used this as a mechanism to reduce the size of their military.

Conclusion

The battle of Bakhmut has been described as one of the bloodiest battles of the 21st century, with the battlefield being described as 'vortex' for both the Ukrainian and Russian militaries. With extremely high casualties, costly ground assaults with very little ground gained, many compared fighting in Bakhmut to battlefield conditions on the Western front of World War I. What is of significance is the importance of fighting in urban areas, the dynamics of which are very different, For its part, Russia used Wagner fighters on the front line while keeping their own troops in reserve, an innovative method of waging hybrid warfare.

The overall strategic value of Bakhmut has been considered dubious by many analysts, observing that the resources and lives spent assaulting and defending the city far outweigh its importance.

Its capture claimed by Russia and denied by President Zelenskyy was a matter of splitting hair, as finally, it is a mere symbol as the town was destroyed and its strategic value diminished, or did political considerations over ride military considerations?

But what comes next for Russia is unclear. Earlier it was felt that the capture of Bakhmut would be a springboard for further advances. However, Ukraine backed proxy troops engaged in a rare cross-border assault in Southern Russia. The fighters are said to have used at least three US made armored vehicles during the incursion.

Endnotes

[1] George Wright, Ukraine war: Wagner says Bakhmut transfer to Russian army under way, The BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65705733>

[2] Isobel Koshiw, Ukrainians blow up bridge in Bakhmut amid reports Russia closing in, The Reuters, 14 February 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/14/ukrainians-blow-up-bridge-in-bakhmut-amid-reports-russia-closing-in>

[3] Peter Beaumont, Fighting in east Ukraine descends into trench warfare as Russia seeks breakthrough, The Guardian, 28 November, 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/28/hundreds-dead-in-ukraine-as-frontline-trench-war-escalates>

[4] Ukraine updates: Zelenskyy says Russians 'destroyed' Bakhmut, DW, October 12, 2022 <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-updates-zelenskyy-says-russians-destroyed-bakhmut/a-64055819>

[5] David Rising, Russia's Wagner boss threatens Bakhmut pullout in Ukraine, AP News, 05 May 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-wagner-bakhmut-40eea0f86be16a77830c369acd0a9d9f>

[6] Ukrainian defenders oust Russian forces from some positions in Bakhmut, Ukraine general says, May 02, 2023 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukrainian-defenders-oust-russian-forces-some-positions-bakhmut-ukraine-general-2023-05-01/>

[7] Wagner's leader says private army withdrawing from Bakhmut, handing control to Moscow, OBS News, May 25, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/wagners-leader-says-private-army-withdrawing-from-bakhmut-handing-control-to-moscow>

[8] Matthew Mpoke Bigg and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Seeing a Prize, Russia Inundates a Ukraine City With Troops, New York Times, 31 January, 2023 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/31/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-bakhmut.html>

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