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Explainer: Why is Russia Trying So Hard to Capture the Small Ukrainian City of Bakhmut?

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A local resident stands behind anti-tank constructions on a street in Bakhmut, Donetsk region of Ukraine.
Anatolii Stepanov / AFP

Russian forces have been attempting to seize Bakhmut in Ukraine's Donetsk region for at least seven months. But in recent weeks, the battle in and around the city has become one of the fiercest of the nine-month war in Ukraine.

Bakhmut, which sits above a vast salt mine and is famed for its Soviet-era winery, has been badly damaged — and in parts totally destroyed — by constant shelling.

Russia's determination to take Bakhmut has puzzled many observers, who question Moscow's huge commitment of resources to the fight despite the city's relative lack of strategic significance.

The Moscow Times considers why the Kremlin might be so keen to capture the city.

What appeal does Bakhmut hold for the Russian Armed Forces?

Seizing Bakhmut would give Russia a small, strategic foothold to launch a wider offensive against the Ukrainian-held cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk to the north.

Bakhmut also sits on a crucial highway that runs diagonally through Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

But Russia's focus on the city has nonetheless baffled analysts, who point out that the battle to take Bakhmut has cost Moscow dearly in both men and equipment.

"No one really understands the significance of Bakhmut," said defense analyst Konrad Muzyka of Poland-based Rochan Consulting.

"No one can really explain... why Russians are fighting so ferociously for it."

One possible reason for Russia pouring so many men and resources into the battle is that it has become a question of military prestige — after months of trying to take the city, Moscow is reluctant to admit defeat.

"Russia has been fighting for such a long time, they think they may as well do everything they can to capture Bakhmut," Muzyka told The Moscow Times.

Which Russian troops are leading the assault?

The fighting is being led by Russian mercenary company Wagner, backed up by Russian artillery, units of mobilized soldiers and air power.

Headed by Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner employs mercenaries, including thousands recruited from Russian prisons, and has seen its profile rise greatly since the invasion of Ukraine began.

"When Wagner conducts attacks [in Bakhmut], the first wave is former inmates, the second is Russian mobilized servicemen, then the third wave is regular Wagner troops," Muzyka said.

However, the head-on assaults carried out by Russian forces in and around Bakhmut have, so far, been largely repelled by the Ukrainian military.

"It's like a conveyor belt," one Ukrainian machine-gunner deployed in Bakhmut said in an interview with the Financial Times last week.

What does Wagner have to gain from seizing Bakhmut?

Following a number of embarrassing setbacks in recent months, the Russian military appears to be under growing pressure from the Kremlin for battlefield success.

Should Wagner finally capture Bakhmut, it would mark a significant victory for the mercenary group and boost Prigozhin's reputation domestically, according to Mark Galeotti, an expert on Russian security at University College London.

“There used to be something of a military rationale when the Russians were trying to advance … but it has long since been more about bloody-mindedness and Prigozhin’s desire — need — for a victory,” Galeotti told The Moscow Times.

What has the fighting been like?

Photographs and videos from Bakhmut show extensive damage to the city and its infrastructure from many months of shelling.

In his weekly address on Friday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said that “to all intents and purposes, the occupiers have destroyed Bakhmut — one more Donbas town that the Russian army has turned into scorched ruins.”

Fewer than 10,000 civilians — many without electricity and water – are estimated to remain in the city whose pre-war population numbered around 70,000.

While the combat itself has involved heavy artillery use, there has also been street-to-street fighting. And recent images of devastated forests and mud-filled trenches around Bakhmut prompted comparisons with the Western Front in World War I.

Will Russia succeed in capturing Bakhmut?

Meter by meter, Wagner forces have been edging closer to the city in recent weeks.

Flanked by conventional Russian forces to the north and south, the attacking troops made a significant breakthrough late last month around the village of Opytne. Although they have reportedly since been unable to capitalize on these territorial gains.

To seize the city would require defeating some of Ukraine’s most battle-hardened units.

And, militarily, the takeover of Bakhmut would be unlikely to pave the way to any new Russian advances.

“Capturing the city is unlikely to have a big impact on the overall operational situation,” Muzyka said.

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