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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Prigozhin Says 20K Wagner Fighters Killed in Battle for Bakhmut

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Members of Wagner group waving a Russian national flag and Wagner Group's flag on the rooftop of a damaged building in Bakhmut. **@concordgroup_official / AFP**

Russia's Wagner mercenary group lost 20,000 fighters while fighting for the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, half of which were convicts recruited from prisons, the group's leader Yevgeny Prigozhin said in an interview published late Tuesday.

Prigozhin, a Kremlin-linked catering magnate, has relied heavily on convicts from Russian prisons to fuel Wagner's offensive in eastern Ukraine, particularly in Bakhmut, the scene of the longest and bloodiest battle in Moscow's 15-month Ukraine offensive.

"Throughout the [entire combat] operation, I recruited 50,000 prisoners, of which about 20% died. Exactly the same number died as those who signed up through a contract," Prigozhin told the pro-Kremlin political consultant Konstantin Dolgov during a video interview.

“PMC Wagner completely liberated Artyomovsk [Bakhmut],” Prigozhin said, repeating his Saturday announcement that Wagner had claimed total control of Bakhmut.

Ukraine's military spokesman Serhiy Cherevaty on Tuesday denied that Bakhmut had fallen to Russian forces.

According to Prigozhin, around 35,000 Wagner fighters in total took part in the battle for Bakhmut.

He also said that Wagner would hand control of Bakhmut to the Russian Defense Ministry by June 1, and send its mercenaries to field camps.

"If PMC Wagner cannot hand the positions because the Russian army is not ready to take them over, then this means that PMC Wagner has risen to a level higher than the Russian army," Prigozhin said during the interview.

"If they [the army] cannot take over [the positions], then the persons concerned must shoot themselves," Prigozhin added.

Embed:

> Yevgeny Prigozhin says that Russia's objectives of "denazifying" and "demilitarising" Ukraine have failed miserably
>
> "F*ck knows how, but we've militarised Ukraine!" pic.twitter.com/ZBIyo0Vd3A
>
> — Francis Scarr (@francis_scarr) May 24, 2023

Prigozhin has long complained about the Defense Ministry and Wagner not being given the appropriate amount of ammunition.

"There was only Wagner here [in Bakhmut]," he said in the video posted on Saturday. "We fought not only the Ukrainian army here, we fought Russian bureaucracy."

Bakhmut, a Ukrainian salt-mining town that once had a population of 70,000 people, has been destroyed during the fighting between Moscow and Kyiv.

The two camps are now awaiting a counteroffensive announced by Ukrainian authorities who are backed by Western arms deliveries.

AFP contributed reporting.

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