

Why A Small City In Ukraine Is A Focal Point In The War



John P. Ruehl

The small Ukrainian city of Bakhmut has seemingly limited strategic significance. But coupled with its growing psychological value, Russia will continue attempting to take the city, despite high casualties, by whatever means necessary.

Since the Ukrainian army's counteroffensive started [gaining momentum in September 2022](#), the Russian army has largely been on the defensive. Russian [drone and missile strikes](#) continue to target Ukraine's major cities, but its military forces have retreated from attempts to take [Kherson](#), [Kharkiv](#), or any other major Ukrainian settlement. Strong defensive fortifications built by Russian and Ukrainian armed forces across the frontline have stalled major advances as troops from both sides have mostly opted to dig in.

But the Kremlin has [directed thousands of its forces since August 2022](#) to attack the small Donetsk city of Bakhmut. The war has in [several ways been an](#) "old-fashioned conflict, based on attrition, on devastating artillery strikes, and on dug-in positions reminiscent of the trenches of World War I," as opposed to some of the quick offensives and counteroffensives that were seen during the first part of the current conflict.

According to a January 10, 2023, [article](#) in PBS NewsHour, the Ukrainian-backed governor of the Donetsk region, Pavlo Kyrylenko, "estimated more than two months ago that 90 percent of Bakhmut's prewar population of over 70,000 had fled since Moscow focused on seizing the entire Donbas." The fighting and destruction have only intensified since Kyrylenko made this statement, but the Kremlin appears intent on capturing Bakhmut for propaganda purposes and to tout a tactical victory after months of retreats. According to a Ukrainian analyst, "Bakhmut is mostly a political goal for Russia—it's being done mostly for the sake of propaganda reasons to show everybody that after so many months and utter failures in Kherson and Kharkiv, it still can capture a more or less significant

city,” [stated](#) a TRT World article.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has sought to prove that Ukrainian forces still have the capability to hold back the Russian advance, and made a [surprise visit to Bakhmut on December 20](#). On January 9, 2023, Zelenskyy declared that the defense of the nearby city of Soledar had led to the gain of [“additional time and power for Ukraine.”](#) But the Ukrainian armed forces have had to divert [“significant reinforcements”](#) to the battle from other parts of the country since January, according to Britain’s Ministry of Defense. And despite [heavy Russian casualties](#), high Ukrainian casualties [have also become a concern](#) for Kyiv.

[Western](#) and [Ukrainian](#) officials have often downplayed the strategic importance of Bakhmut, depicting it as a sinkhole for Russian forces that may result in a [“Pyrrhic victory.”](#) Nonetheless, the phrase [“hold Bakhmut”](#) has become a Ukrainian rallying cry, and Zelenskyy’s visit demonstrated the growing symbolic importance of controlling the city.

Bakhmut, however, does possess some strategic value. Few major settlements exist to its west until the Dnieper River, and the [flatter and open terrain](#) would make Ukrainian attempts to reinforce from this direction vulnerable to Russian surveillance and firepower. Ukraine also has [relatively poor road infrastructure](#), and [Bakhmut serves as a critical juncture of transport and communication lines for Ukrainian forces in the region](#), including [strategic supply lines](#) to the Ukrainian-controlled settlements of Siversk, Lyman, Slovyansk, and [Kramatorsk](#).

For Russia, seizing Bakhmut would allow it to disrupt these supply lines, as well as take pressure off [the battle over Russia-controlled Kremmina](#), which Ukrainian forces have been fighting to recover. Bakhmut is therefore key to Russian attempts to consolidate and stabilize the Donbas, where Russia has fought since [2014](#) and initially made gains in 2022, before the Ukrainian counteroffensive in September.

Taking or destroying key industrial centers in the Donbas region will also reduce [Ukraine’s industrial output, leading to its economy suffering further](#).

Bakhmut stands out as the only major area where Russian forces are on the offensive, but the frontline has been relatively stable up until recently. Yet throughout January 2023, Russian forces have moved to the city’s flank and made

increasing gains in the nearby town of Soledar. After weeks of fighting, the Kremlin stated that [Soledar had been captured on January 13](#), this was later confirmed by the Institute for the Study of War and [Ukrainian armed forces](#).

Russian forces have enjoyed an [advantage over Ukrainian forces in artillery numbers](#), and an [early transition to a wartime economy](#) by the Kremlin has further helped sustain months of [relentless artillery](#) strikes by it. Nonetheless, Russia has [turned to countries like North Korea](#) in recent months to obtain more artillery, and its artillery fire has decreased in recent days, [according to U.S. and Ukrainian officials](#).

But Ukraine's more limited artillery capabilities [have also recently been threatened](#). Despite pleas for more 155-millimeter artillery rounds, [Western manufacturers have struggled](#) to supply an adequate quantity and ramp up production. This has forced the U.S. to [ask South Korea for artillery](#) and [Washington also secured hundreds of thousands of 155mm artillery shells](#) for Ukraine from its stockpiles in Israel. Meanwhile, according to [U.S. defense officials](#), "A third of the roughly 350 Western-made howitzers donated to Kyiv are out of action at any given time."

Western countries have now been focusing on delivering more advanced weapons to Ukraine, such as [missile defense systems, tanks, and armored vehicles](#). Recent pledges by the [UK](#) and [Canada](#) to supply Ukraine with heavy vehicles ([as well as pressure on Germany and the U.S. to do so as well](#)) will no doubt help Ukrainian forces on the frontline. But with Russia currently dictating where the fiercest fighting will take place, Bakhmut's vulnerability to artillery has made holding it a significant challenge.

Local militia groups and the Russian military have naturally played essential roles in the ongoing battle for Bakhmut and its surrounding regions. But perhaps most notable is that [much of Russia's recent progress](#) has been made by the Russian private military company, Wagner.

Wagner has [operated](#) in Ukraine since 2014 and has expanded its reach to countries [across Africa and the Middle East](#), while the company's owner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, has been keen to [demonstrate](#) his private army can accomplish major military objectives. Additionally, the [deaths](#) of Wagner mercenaries are not counted as official Russian casualties, making the costly effort to take Bakhmut

easier for the Russian public to stomach. In early January 2023, the first Wagner fighters, who were “secretly pardoned convicts” recruited by the company returned home after completing their contracts, [causing controversy in Russia](#) and highlighting the role of the non-state actor in the conflict.

Western and Ukrainian observers believe that Wagner troops [have suffered casualties in the thousands](#). Prigozhin, meanwhile, stated [on a telegram channel](#) in November 2022 that “Our goal is not Bakhmut... [itself] but the destruction of the Ukrainian army and the reduction of its combat potential, which has an extremely positive effect on other areas, which is why this operation was dubbed the ‘Bakhmut meat grinder.’”

It is also suspected that Prigozhin [aims to seize the salt and gypsum mines in the region](#), similar to other Wagner efforts to gain [access to resources across conflict zones](#) in Africa and the Middle East.

The outsized role of Wagner in the battle, as well as [Prigozhin’s growing profile in Russia](#), has led to significant [tension between the oligarch and the Russian military](#). After the capture of Soledar, Prigozhin claimed this was solely due to Wagner, while the Russian Defense Ministry [claimed](#) a few days later that victory was thanks to the Russian armed forces without mentioning the Wagner mercenaries.

The dispute between the Russian military and Wagner has come [amid a leadership shakeup](#) among the top brass of the Russian military. Valery Gerasimov, chief of the Russian general staff, replaced Sergei Surovikin as the Ukraine campaign’s overall commander on January 11. The change indicates the Kremlin’s frustration with the fledgling promises of the Russian armed forces. Nonetheless, the slow success of Russian artillery strikes in Soledar combined with Wagner troops shows that the two can work together.

But Bakhmut, so far, remains elusive for the Kremlin. Whichever side controls the city will have an advantage over any potential offensives later in 2023 and will have more say over where the next major battles take place. While Ukraine’s armed forces remain united under a more centralized command, the Kremlin will have to be careful of the growing tension between its armed forces, local militia groups, and private military companies.

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