



Inch by bloody inch in Ukraine war, Russia is closing in on Bakhmut

Description

UKRAINE: A lone Russian soldier stumbling along a track through an open field suddenly reels as a burst of gunfire kicks up the dirt around him. He looks back for a second, poised for flight, but then keeps stumbling forward into the gunfire.

“Do you see? He’s not carrying a weapon,” said Yaroslav, a filmmaker in civilian life who now leads a drone reconnaissance unit that filmed the incident.

“He’s a digger,” Yaroslav added, referring to one of the unarmed men Russian commanders send into the teeth of Ukrainian fire to dig trenches and carry ammunition. In keeping with military protocol, he and other soldiers interviewed for this article gave only their first names or military nicknames.

The Russian army has been throwing thousands of men into battle for more than two months in its latest attempt to take the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut and the surrounding area. The campaign has been ruthless and hugely costly for both sides, but especially for the Russians, even as they have inched forward.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine has said that he and his generals are determined to hold on in Bakhmut, saying that the battle is doing much to degrade Russia’s forces. And Ukrainian commanders on the front lines say that they sense that Russian units are hollowed out and could collapse in the face of a strong Ukrainian counteroffensive that is widely expected in the spring, after promised Western weapons are in place.



A soldier from the Third Assault Brigade mortar unit near Bakhmut this month. The fighting has been so intense that some Ukrainian troops say they are taken aback by seeing so many Russian casualties. Credit...Daniel Berehulak/The New York Times

Until then, however, they face a relentless opponent that keeps creeping forward in a grim, block-by-block struggle on the front lines of the city.

“Our task from the beginning of the year: ‘Hold Bakhmut until the beginning of April,’” a Ukrainian marksman, Stas Osman, from the Aidar battalion, wrote on the Telegram messaging app. “The guys drive into the city, but only in armored vehicles. The danger of such a move cannot be overestimated.”

Infantry from the 3rd Assault Brigade spent the past three months fighting waves of Russian soldiers around Bakhmut, many of them former prisoners recruited by the Wagner private military group. Although the fighting has been deadly, watching the Russians charge ahead to their deaths has been a psychological shock as well.

“In the first month every day, five to six times a day, groups of 10 to 15 people were advancing on our infantry position through the tree line,” said the unit’s media officer, who uses the code name Zmist. “They are killed and they come again.”

“Psychologically it’s difficult — it’s something unseen,” he said. “Our guys are wondering if they are on drugs. Otherwise, how can they go to certain death, stepping over the rotting corpses of their colleagues? You can go mad a bit.”

Ukrainian reconnaissance units use drones to watch for Russian military movements and help

coordinate artillery fire on advancing enemy troops. Spending hours watching reams of video footage from the battlefield, the soldiers have been able to study Russia's methods and tactics, including its use of diggers and porters.

A man in camouflage stands in a field, with a small drone hovering above his outstretched arm.

Image not found or type unknown

A Ukrainian soldier from a drone unit during a reconnaissance mission near Bakhmut this month.
Credit...Daniel Berehulak/The New York Times

"They have a very good separation of tasks," Yaroslav said. "Some only dig, some bring ammunition, some are shooters and they separately make their assault."

The Russians are very good at digging in, Yaroslav added. As soon as their troops push forward, men with shovels come in behind and dig foxholes and bunkers, while others carry forward ammunition and stash it in the holes. "Soon they have a whole village," he said.

The Russian strategy is enforced by anti-retreat units, Ukrainian commanders say, as the video of the soldier stumbling toward the Ukrainian guns appeared to show. When he came under fire, Yaroslav noted, the Russian looked back to his own lines. But he did not turn back, Yaroslav added, in all probability because Russian soldiers are told that they will be shot or imprisoned if they retreat.

Ukrainian commanders said they had heard such orders from Russian commanders on phone intercepts, and even seen them in a document found in the pocket of a dead soldier that warned that the punishment for desertion was execution.

Most of the Russians in the forefront of the battle are recently mobilized troops who have had minimal training, but they are good at two things, Yaroslav said: crawling and hiding underground.

"They will just crawl," he said. "Even when there are bullets flying a meter over their heads, they will just crawl."

The Russian troops often hide in dugouts during the day to avoid detection and creep forward at night, soldiers said. In one instance, Yaroslav said, the Russians feigned a retreat from forward positions at dusk. But when Ukrainian troops made a nighttime assault, they discovered Russians armed and ready in undetected foxholes and dugouts.



Ukrainian forces are using reconnaissance drones to watch for Russian military movements and help coordinate artillery fire on advancing enemy troops.Credit...Daniel Berehulak/The New York Times

However archaic the tactics, they have enabled Russian units to advance incrementally, threatening the two roads that Ukraine uses to supply its troops inside the city of Bakhmut — the T0504, an asphalt highway that runs through the suburb of Ivanivske, and the O0506, a smaller country road through Khromove to Chasiv Yar.

In February, the Russians nearly achieved their goal of encircling Bakhmut. Troops advanced in a pincer movement, attacking from the southwest and northeast, reaching the two roads at times.

In a sign of just how close the Russian troops came, on Feb. 2 the Ukrainians blew up a bridge on the T0504 highway when the Russians seized part of the road from the south. At the end of February, they destroyed a bridge on the Chasiv Yar road to stall the Russian advance from the north.

If Russian forces had captured the main highway, their troops could have bypassed Bakhmut and quickly advanced to the industrial town of Kostyantynivka, Ukrainian commanders and officials said.

“Bakhmut is here, but next there is a chain of cities,” Mariana Bezuhla, the deputy head of the parliament’s Security Committee, explained in an interview in the city of Kramatorsk. “Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Druzhkivka and Kostyantynivka, all those cities, hundreds of thousands of people.”

In mid-February, Ukrainian assault units began a series of concentrated attacks to push the Russians back from the T0504 highway. The assault came only just in time, with Russian troops beginning to close in on the Chasiv Yar road as well. More troops were brought in to repel Russian advances there.

All the while, fighting was intensifying inside the city.



An apartment building destroyed by an artillery strike in Chasiv Yar, near Bakhmut, at the beginning of March. Credit...Daniel Berehulak/The New York Times

Ms. Bezuhla traveled into Bakhmut under cover of darkness last week. “The town is destroyed,” she said. “I was in Bakhmut about three weeks ago, and even since then the difference was very big.”

She said the din of fighting was constant. “It is permanently being attacked when you are in Bakhmut. There are permanent street fights and planes, and it’s creepy, because the planes are not ours.”

Fighting has moved from the small private houses on the east side of the town, across the river to the multistory residential blocks in the center. When they encountered resistance, Russian troops simply demolished block after block with artillery, said Mamuka Mamulashvili, the commander of the Georgian Legion, a grouping of Georgian and other international soldiers whose units were fighting inside the city.

“Artillery is pushing us back,” he said. “They are deleting whole blocks.”

A war veteran, Yevhen Dykyi, interviewed on a regional Ukrainian television channel, First Western, quoted a friend who had just returned from Bakhmut: “Finally, I escaped hell.”

“This hell is close combat,” Dykyi said. “When you see the enemy’s face. When you throw grenades at each other’s windows, when the fighting is in private houses, and one house is ours and the next house is theirs.”

Fighting in the ruins of high-rise buildings was no easier, he said. “One entrance can be ours, one entrance is theirs.”

Through a broken window, a street full of damaged and destroyed buildings can be seen.

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The fight for Bakhmut has leveled large parts of the city, where it’s estimated that only a few thousand civilians remain.Credit...Roman Chop/Associated Press

He quoted another of his friends who was fighting in Bakhmut: “We are tired not so much from the fights, but from the emotional swings. One minute we are in the mood that ‘All of us will die heroically now and there’s no way out.’ Another minute we’re in the mood: ‘Now we will break them, we’ll push them away.’ And these moods change several times a day.”

Bakhmut was a meat grinder for both sides, Dykyi said. But he insisted that Ukraine should hold the city to thwart Russia. “It is very sensitive to symbolic things, symbolic defeats, symbolic victories,” he said of Russia. “And Bakhmut is a symbolic city for them.”

“This amount of Russian losses hasn’t caused an explosion in Russian society yet, but it resonates a lot inside the Russian army,” he added. “And the longer these crazy losses — unjustified in the opinion of lower- and middle-rank soldiers — go on, the lower the morale of the Russian army will be at the time of our counteroffensive.”

By Carlotta Gall

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