

Prigozhin says he's taken Bakhmut but Ukraine disputes the claim



Image credit: AFP Photo/Telegram channel of Concord Group

Yevgeny Prigozhin in Bakhmut Saturday announcing his Wagner Group had taken the city.

On Saturday, Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose private military company, the Wagner Group, has been at the forefront of Russia's prolonged effort to take the largely destroyed city of Bakhmut in Donetsk region in eastern Ukraine, claimed that, after more than seven months of intensive fighting, his troops have finally taken control of the city. On Telegram, he announced that, "Today on May 20, around midday, Bakhmut was taken in its entirety. By May 25 we will completely examine [the city], create the necessary lines of defense and hand it to the military. We ourselves will go into field camps."

Prigozhin, who a week earlier had issued several expletive-laced criticisms of the Russian military leadership for failing to provide his troops with sufficient ammunition, then repeated his verbal attack on the military leadership: "The operation to capture Bakhmut – the Bakhmut meat grinder – lasted 224 days. There was only Wagner here. We fought not only the Ukrainian army here, we fought Russian bureaucracy." He didn't say how many Wagner fighters were killed or wounded in the long fight for Bakhmut – on Friday, Oleksii Reznikov, the Ukrainian minister of defense, estimated the total number of Russian casualties in the battle for Bakhmut at 70,000 – but he did say the losses were "five times higher" than they might otherwise have been because of the Russian military leadership. And he blamed, as he had in his earlier statements, the defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, and the Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, for turning the Russian offensive into "their own amusement.... One day they will pay for their actions."

However, both Ukrainian and Russian officials disputed Prigozhin's claim. Soon after he posted his claim, Hanna Maliar, Ukraine's deputy minister of defense, said on her

Telegram channel, “Heavy fighting in Bakhmut. The situation is critical. As of now, our defenders control certain industrial and infrastructure facilities in the area.... Our forces have taken the city in a semi-encirclement, which gives us the opportunity to destroy the enemy.... The enemy has to defend himself in the part of the city he controls.” And Serhiy Cherevatyi, the spokesman for Ukraine’s eastern command, said Prigozhin’s claim “is not true. Our units are fighting in Bakhmut.” Lt.-Gen. Igor Konashenkov, the Russian defense ministry spokesman, likewise appeared to dispute Prigozhin’s claim, saying, “assault detachments were still engaged in combat operations to liberate Artyomovsk’s western districts.” [In 1924, Bakhmut was renamed Artemivsk in honor of an individual involved in the Revolution. In 2016, the name was changed back to Bakhmut. Russia continues to use the Russian version of Artemivsk.] However, late Saturday night, President Putin congratulated “the Wagner assault units as well as all service personnel of the Russian Federation Armed Forces who had rendered them the required support and protected the flanks, on the completion of the operation to liberate Artemovsk.”

Not surprisingly, after Putin’s statement, yesterday Konashenkov appeared to accept Prigozhin’s claim, saying, “The liberation of the city of Artyomovsk has been completed in the Artyomovsk area as a result of the offensive actions of the Wagner assault detachments supported by artillery and aviation of the southern battlegroup.” However, he noted that “Russian aviation and artillery continue strikes against Ukrainian forces in the Artyomovsk area.” And while acknowledging that the Russian forces now control most of Bakhmut, yesterday Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, the commander of Ukrainian ground forces, said, “Despite the fact that we now control an insignificant part of Bakhmut, the importance of its defence does not lose its relevance. We continue advancing on the flanks in the suburbs of Bakhmut and are actually close to tactically encircling the city. Thanks to this, we will be able to control all high-rise buildings seized by the enemy and gradually decimate them. This deprives the enemy of control over the approaches to the city and gives us certain tactical benefits.” The situation, he said, “is challenging but controlled.”

And so, notwithstanding Prigozhin’s claims and Putin’s congratulations, the battle continues in and around Bakhmut.

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