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In a Shattered Ukrainian Town, a Long Battle Nears a Sudden End

The loss of Vuhledar, at the intersection of two fronts, would complicate the defense of a regional transit hub and strengthen Russian supply lines, Ukrainian soldiers say.

Members of the White Angels, an evacuation unit that's part of the national police, carrying a woman who suffered a stroke in the village of Zoriane, Ukraine, on Thursday. Credit...Nicole Tung for The New York Times



By [Marc Santora](#)

Marc Santora and a photographer, Nicole Tung, traveled last week with the White Angels police unit on evacuation missions to villages around Vuhledar in eastern Ukraine.

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For nearly three years, the mining town of Vuhledar has underpinned Ukraine's defense of its southern Donbas region, the industrial heart of the country that has become a tableau of desolation and destruction.

Now the town, its rows of stark Soviet-style apartment blocks battered by the full force of Moscow's arsenal, is falling to Russian troops who have been grinding their way across the region in recent months, Ukrainian soldiers said.

On Monday, Russian forces moved into part of Vuhledar for the first time, hanging a flag over a ruined building, according to [combat footage](#) released by Russian forces and verified by military analysts. On Tuesday, Russian soldiers waved a flag from the roof of what remains of the town's main municipal building, [combat footage showed](#).

It was unclear if the Russians had complete control over the town and the Ukrainian military had no official comment.

Soldiers who have taken part in the fight described how they battled to withdraw under attack from multiple directions.

The impending loss of Vuhledar highlights what has become a grim pattern in the war in eastern Ukraine, with Russia's scorched-earth tactics and headlong assaults steadily eroding Ukrainian defenses with the capture of a string of strategic towns and cities.

Defeat in Vuhledar would represent both a strategic loss for the Ukrainian military as its defensive lines buckle under months of relentless assault and a symbolic blow given the central role this town has played holding back the Russian onslaught.

As the final battle for the city unfolded, Ukrainian soldiers said the only way out for soldiers still in the city late last week was on foot as they were hunted by drones and bombarded by artillery.

"There's nowhere to hold ground," said Doc, the call sign for a senior lieutenant from the 72nd Mechanized Brigade, which has been defending Vuhledar. "The logistics are disrupted, making it almost impossible to stay there."

Image



Vuhledar in June 2023. Credit...Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Image



Civilians waving down a police van as they seek help for an injured man in Kurakhivka, Ukraine, on Thursday. Credit... Nicole Tung for The New York Times

Image



The White Angels assisted the injured man, Andriy Khryshtopa, whose car had been struck by a drone. Credit... Nicole Tung for The New York Times

The loss of Vuhledar, the soldiers said, would allow the Russians to step up attacks in the direction of Pokrovsk, a rail and road hub about 35 miles to the north. And it would ease pressure on Russian supply lines moving across southern Ukraine to Crimea.

The capture of Vuhledar would also expose some difficult-to-defend areas and villages to its north and west to Russian attack, they said.

Despite its gains, the offensive has been costly for Russia.

British officials say that the past four months have been [the deadliest of the war for Russian forces](#) and analysts say it is unclear how long they can sustain the current pace of attacks.

Civilians living in the area have spoken of a rapid Russian advance.

Olha Bondarenko, 63, walked for two days to cross the front line after the Russians swept into her village, destroying homes and other buildings.

“I will only go to Ukraine because there is terror over there,” Ms. Bondarenko said as she sat in an ambulance in Kurakhove, a town controlled by Ukraine. “It’s a nightmare.”



Ukrainian marines training in the Vuhledar region in August 2023. Credit... Tyler Hicks/The New York Times



The 72nd Mechanized Brigade at a position outside Vuhledar in February 2023. The brigade continues to defend the town. Credit...Tyler Hicks/The New York Times



Chaplain Tereshchenko Ivan Petrovich, also known as Father Ivan, of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, blessing the soldiers of the 72nd in Vuhledar in May. Credit...Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Maj. Vasyl Pipa, 41, a member of the White Angels, a unit of the national police responsible for evacuations, said the annihilation of villages was shocking.

“This destruction goes ahead of the Russian military,” he said on Wednesday as he raced to evacuate civilians from villages on the outskirts of Vuhledar. “It’s like death.”

Under a clear blue sky, the steppe stretched to the horizon, with slag heaps from the coal mines that once fueled the local economy punctuating the flat expanse. Amid the rumble of artillery, plumes of black smoke billowed along the road as glide bombs thundered down around his armored car.

Vuhledar stood longer than other places that served as fortress towns for months or years before falling to Russian forces, like Bakhmut and Avdiivka. Over the years, its residents have lived under constant attack.



The ruins of Vuhledar in January. Credit...Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

“Everything short of nuclear weapons rains down on them,” Lieutenant Doc said on Friday after completing another mission to evacuate the wounded. “Words cannot convey this.”

The commander of an assault platoon, Lt. Serhii Stetsenko, described [in January](#) how the town had come under relentless attack from the air and ground. “At first, it’s terrifying,” he said, “but now I don’t know if it’s scary or not.” The 41-year-old father of two was killed in May.

By this summer, years of fighting without rotation or proper replenishment had taken its toll, soldiers said.

After repeated failures attacking Vuhledar from the south, the Russians began to push forward to the northeast of the city this spring.

“When Russians pushed to take control over the road toward Vodiane and started moving on flanks, it became clear we might lose it if no reinforcements were directed to the area,” said Roman, a brigade commander.

Senior Lt. Dmytro, another member of the 72nd Brigade, said the situation had turned critical when the Russians captured two mines that had served as bases northeast of the city.



A White Angels officer driving past a resident of the town of Hirnyk, Ukraine, on Thursday, as smoke rose after a Russian strike. Credit...Nicole Tung for The New York Times



Natalia Shram, 63, mourning her son, the Ukrainian serviceman Bohdan Shram, 23, in Dnipro on Friday. He was killed in a Russian strike on the town of Pokrovsk a week earlier. Credit...Nicole Tung for The New York Times



Olha Bondarenko, 63, after arriving in the town of Kurakhove, Ukraine, on Wednesday. Ms. Bondarenko says she walked for two days from her village, which is now under Russian control. Credit...Nicole Tung for The New York Times

Lieutenant Dmytro, like more than a dozen other soldiers interviewed on the front this month, asked that only his first name or call sign be used in accordance with military protocol.

A colonel in the White Angels, Artem Shchus, estimated that there were around 50 people still trapped in Vuhledar, a fraction of the 14,000 who once lived there.

Ms. Bondarenko, the woman who walked across the front line, described how the Russian forces came to her village after a “horrifying” bombing campaign.

After her home went up in flames, she set off on foot and came across a Russian soldier.

Russia was responsible for destroying her home, she told him, and she was going to put her life back together — in Ukrainian-controlled territory. Before she walked off, she said, she heard a call come over the Russian’s radio, offering a glimpse of his side’s struggles.

“Help us,” she said she heard another Russian soldier say. “We’ve been four days without water and food.”

She did not hear a reply, she said, only silence.



An apartment that was hit by an airstrike in Vuhledar in May 2022. Credit...Finbarr O'Reilly for The New York Times

Liubov Sholudko contributed reporting from eastern Ukraine. Maria Varenikova contributed reporting from Kyiv.

[Marc Santora](#) has been reporting from Ukraine since the beginning of the war with Russia. He was previously based in London as an international news editor focused on breaking news events and earlier the bureau chief for East and Central Europe, based in Warsaw. He has also reported extensively from Iraq and Africa. [More about Marc Santora](#)