



# A New Horizon in Urban Warfare in Ukraine?

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UKRAINE — A  
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## ABSTRACT

The Russian invasion of Ukraine serves as another illustration of the urban nature of contemporary war. While cities have been battlegrounds throughout history, it is only in the last few decades that military thinkers and strategists have seriously started to consider urban warfare as imperative – that cities have become *unavoidable* in war. In this article, I provide an overview of the type of urban warfare we have seen unfolding in Ukraine so far, and discuss what appear to be mismatches between these urban battles and the type of urban wars anticipated and planned for by Western military organizations and strategic thinkers. In some respects, the general character of the urban warfare we see unfolding in Ukraine has more in common with medieval than modern warfare. While Russia pursues a brutal combination of siege warfare with heavy and indiscriminate bombardment of cities, Ukraine has developed an effective urbanized defence, not only by using the urban terrain to its advantage, but by using cities as fortresses and bases of operation.

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In recent years, urban warfare has become a subject of great interest to military strategic thinkers and defence communities. While urban warfare is an ancient phenomenon, and cities and warfare have been intimately connected throughout history (Virilio, 2002), war has become an increasingly urbanized phenomenon. As pointed out by Anthony King (2022a, p. 69), “In the early twenty-first century, the longest and most intense battles have occurred in cities, not in the field. The wars in Iraq, Syria, the Donbas, Libya and Yemen have all been predominantly fought not only for but, often, actually inside cities.”

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is yet another illustrative example of the urbanization of warfare, as the invasion to a very large degree has been concentrated to urban areas. But while it would seem clear that cities are one of the primary objectives and targets of Russia’s military, urbanized war in Ukraine does not necessarily correspond to the type of urban war Western military organizations and strategic thinkers seem to have anticipated, planned, or trained for. In this article, I discuss and illustrate what appear to be some mismatches between the mode of urban warfare as anticipated by Western forces, principally the American and British armies and NATO, and the urban warfare we see unfolding in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> While Russia’s conduct largely represents “more of the same” in terms of a precedent set in, say, Grozny and Aleppo, in general terms the character of the urban warfare unfolding in Ukraine has more in common with medieval than with modern warfare.

This article is structured in four parts. In order to set the current urbanized war in Ukraine into a historical and theoretical context, the next section looks into the main factors proposed in the war studies literature to explain what is held to be the unavoidable nature of urban warfare. Following this, I explore the type of urban battles Western military organizations such as the American and British Armies and NATO have primarily been anticipating so that a specific comparison with the ongoing war in Ukraine may be drawn. In the penultimate section, I provide an overview and characterization of the type of urban warfare we have seen unfolding so far in Ukraine; in the concluding section that follows that, I make some final comments on the deadly mix of Ukraine’s urbanized defence and Russia’s ongoing urbicide.

## THE UNAVOIDABLE URBAN BATTLE TO COME

It was noted half a century ago by S. L. A. Marshall (1973, p. 3) that other than general warnings against war in cities, military strategists have historically not had much to say about urban warfare: “Run through the list of writers and their works – Frederick, de Saxe, Clausewitz, Jomini, Kuropatkin, Bernhardt, Henderson, Foch, Fuller, Hart, et al. Not one has anything to say about military operations within or against the city.” This neglect is quite puzzling given that important strategic advantages have always come with the possession or control of certain cities. Historically, urban areas have both represented and harboured power and wealth; armies have fought enemies for and in cities since time immemorial. The control of major cities is one of the clearest indicators of military progress and the denial or capture of important cities can determine the success or failure of an entire conflict (DiMarco, 2003; DiMarco, 2012; Landau-Wells, 2018). This is not a phenomenon particular to any one specific era.

This indifference to urban warfare largely continued during the Cold War, when urban dimensions were overshadowed by notions of networked warfare and the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA; see Evans, 2016, p. 38). Up until this point, it seems that the general assumption was that fighting *inside* cities could be avoided in war, more or less, and that wars could be fought and won in the open field. In recent decades, however, with Mogadishu in 1993 and Grozny the year after being the first wake-up calls (King, 2021, p. 5), Western military strategists have increasingly begun to perceive urban terrain as *unavoidable* in warfare (Warren, 2002, p. 615; Glenn et al., 2006; Beevor, 2017, pp. 6–7; Konaev, 2019, pp. 20–21). In 2016, the often-cited American general and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark A. Milley stated that “in the future, I can say with very high degrees of confidence, the American Army is probably going to be fighting in urban areas” (Tan, 2016). In 2018, General Stephen Townsend, Commanding General of Training and Doctrine Command agreed; discussing future urban

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<sup>1</sup> Since it is notoriously difficult to gain access to trustworthy information in an ongoing war, all conclusions and depictions of the war in this article must be considered preliminary. The analysis builds entirely on open secondary sources.

warfare in megacities, he argued that there was “little way to avoid it” (Lacdan, 2018). The U.S. Army and Marine Corps urban warfare manual from 2017 claims that military operations in cities are now “both inevitable and the norm” (ATP 3-06, 2017, p. 1). The British Army similarly assumes that urban warfare now represents the “new normal” (British Army, 2021) since “the future operating environment is going to be increasingly urbanised” (UK Ministry of Defence, 2020, p. 145). NATO similarly assumes future involvement in urban operations to be inevitable: “It is not a matter of ‘if’ but rather ‘when’ NATO will be involved in urban operations across the spectrum of conflict from humanitarian to stabilization missions and combat operations” (Bodnar and Collins, 2019, p. 94).

Many war studies scholars now argue that cities have become one of the most common environments for contemporary armed conflict (Desch, 2001; Hills, 2004; Kilcullen, 2013; Evans, 2016; Konaev, 2019; King 2021).<sup>2</sup> There are a number of reasons presented for this in the literature. One of the principle arguments put forward has to do with urbanization and demographics. In an increasingly urbanized and interconnected world, where both growing numbers of people and political, financial, social and cultural power are concentrated in cities, war is as an effect *forced* into cities (see, for example, Coward, 2009; King, 2021). Much of the literature on urban warfare has focused in particular on post-Cold War intra-state armed conflicts involving insurgencies, guerrilla warfare, and civil wars (see, for example, Hills, 2004; Kilcullen, 2013). Scholars have pointed to the asymmetric advantages that come with bringing the fight into cities, since cities offer insurgents and guerrilla groups plenty of opportunities to hide among civilians, ambush, and to strike back against any technologically superior adversary (see John-Hopkins, 2010 and Kilcullen, 2013, among others).

Anthony King (2021) has perhaps provided the most comprehensive explanation for the rise of urban warfare in the 21st century. King concurs with the arguments that urbanization, demographics, and asymmetry are central explanatory factors. But he argues also that the dismantling of mass armies and the limited number of troops now available means that armies are no longer big enough to form fronts or to surround whole cities. Since it is no longer possible to pursue a war of fronts where mass armies meet on open terrain, war has dispersed into cities where, due to transport nodes, critical national infrastructure, and the concentration of political power, the primary tactical and operational focus has been re-located (King, 2021, p. 40). In addition to this, while the mass armies of the 20th century could both surround and swamp cities, the reduced armies today are more or less devoured by cities and “the urban battle has coalesced into a series of micro-sieges in which combatants struggle over buildings, streets and districts” (King, 2021, p. 16).

For King (2022a), this is why we can expect inter-state wars to migrate into cities, too. Here, the Russian invasion of Ukraine serves as a highly illustrative example. When the Red Army re-took Ukraine from the Nazis in the Battle of the Dnieper in 1943 in one of the largest operations of the Second World War, almost 4,000,000 troops were involved, advancing over a 1,200-kilometer-long front (Harrison, 2018; Egorov, 2020). As Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, with the goal of taking control of Ukraine by removing the government led by Zelensky and installing a puppet regime, Putin had amassed roughly 190,000 troops for the task (Wintour, 2022; Wilkie, 2022). In other words, the punctuated and urbanized character of the ongoing war in Ukraine can be explained, at least in part, by the quite staggering reduction in force size (King, 2022b). Before the invasion, Ukraine had an urbanization rate of about 70%, and the majority of the Ukrainian population of 44 million lived in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. If you want control over Ukraine as a nation, you must have control over its cities.

## THE ANTICIPATED URBAN BATTLE: CIVIL WARS AND FAILING MEGACITIES

The urban war zone has always been challenging to military tactics, communications, and weaponry and is typically associated with low performance and high cost. After the end of the Cold War, and in particular in the aftermath of the chaos in Mogadishu in 1993, there was a perceived need for a renewed urban military doctrine in the United States, which resulted in the Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT) doctrine (Warren, 2002). The U.S.-led invasion

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<sup>2</sup> It should be pointed out that it remains an open question in the literature whether cities are in fact an increasingly common conflict arena (see, for example, Elfversson and Höglund, 2021); nor do all military thinkers agree on the unavoidable nature of urban wars (see, for example, Johnson, 2019).

of Iraq in 2003 entailed further doctrinal developments in relation to urban operations, mainly because the protracted urban counterinsurgency operations were understood to be a problem of a different kind to that experienced in the course of the combat in Grozny and Mogadishu (Johnson, 2019). The shift that followed, and which has more or less endured ever since, builds on an assumption that urban operations will be carried out in cities outside the Western world in a context of civil conflicts, counter-insurgency, or counter-terrorism operations (Warren, 2002, p. 615).

One of the principal assumptions is that the urban battle for which Western allied forces need to prepare is an asymmetrical combat encounter with irregular adversaries such as rebels, terrorists, or insurgents, actively seeking and taking advantage of the complex urban terrain by intermingling with the populace – thereby exacerbating both the moral and ethical challenges facing Western forces as they embark upon expeditionary warfare in urban settings (Hills, 2004). The renewed MOUT doctrine further emphasized the strategic importance of urban operations – but there was also a focus on developing the tactical level. The tactics focused on small unit actions and precision engagement, with an emphasis on protecting civilians and minimizing collateral damage (Johnson, 2019).

Another growing concern among Western military organizations such as the British and American armies are urban operations in rapidly growing and potentially unstable megacities, i.e. cities with more than 10 million inhabitants (Kilcullen 2019, p. xxxiii). NATO has similarly identified the lack of effective governance in megacities resulting in instability as a potential (global) security issue that might necessitate NATO involvement in the future (Bodnar and Collins, 2019, p. 94). The concern about urban operations in megacities is, in other words, closely linked to the heavy focus on civil conflicts. As pointed out by King (2021, p. 41), the U.S. Army's concern about urban operations in megacities is not based on an expectation of having to face Russia or China in such vast urban environments; it has to do with worries about the prospect of having to deal with insurgents, rebels, or terrorists in such cities. As of yet, no Western military organization has conducted any military operations in a megacity.

In light of the description above, the ongoing and urbanized Russian invasion of Ukraine stands in some contrast to the urban battle as anticipated by Western military organizations. Contrary to the assumption that future urban battles are to take place outside the Western world in a context of civil conflict, and involving irregular armed combatants in fragile and unstable cities and megacities, we are now seeing urban battles taking place in developed, well-functioning European cities, in the context of inter-state war between conventional armies. In the war in Ukraine, we do not see rebels or insurgents taking advantage of the opportunities of concealment in complex urban terrain in order to gain leverage against a vastly superior military power; we see the national army of Ukraine doing so. The fact that the numerically inferior Ukrainian defensive forces have displayed impressive resistance in this urbanized war should, however, not come as a surprise. Defence is generally the stronger form of warfare, and it is generally understood that this phenomenon is reinforced further in urban terrain. The battle for Mariupol is a highly illustrative case of how urban terrain, especially when there is sub-terrain, can permit the defender to hold out against a vastly superior attacker. This prompts us to ask if, besides the (unanticipated) contextual setting of the urbanized war in Ukraine, there is anything new revealed in the urban combat unfolding in this war.

## **THE REALIZED URBAN BATTLES IN UKRAINE**

The Russian conduct in Ukraine is in many respects history repeating itself. Alice Hills's description of the war in Chechnya in the 1990s, and in particular the operations in Grozny, are entirely applicable to Russian conduct in Ukraine: "Russian forces addressed the three-dimensional nature of the urban environment by reducing it to two. They appeared incapable of conducting large-scale operations without resorting to the indiscriminate use of massive firepower; artillery was often used to compensate for poor-quality infantry" (Hills, 2004, pp. 151–152). In Grozny, the Russians expected a quick victory based on the assumption that the Chechens would not resist but would, rather, welcome the invading troops. Russia's Minister of Defence at the time predicted that Russia could take Grozny in under two hours (Shemakov, 2022). But it soon became clear that the Russians were gravely mistaken and that some 50,000 Russian troops were not nearly enough to isolate and besiege Grozny, a city of 490,000 people (Hills 2004, p. 153). After this mistake, the Russians regrouped and fought a devastating urban

war, first on and later inside the city of Grozny – a city that was subsequently described by the UN as the most destroyed in the world (BBC News, 2007).<sup>3</sup>

The Russian mistakes in Grozny were more or less repeated in Ukraine, as Russia initially embarked on a similar mission to take control of Kiev, based on a similarly faulty expectation of no resistance, by using about 50,000 troops – although this time to take control of a significantly larger city with almost 3 million people. After the massive failure, based on miscalculations and a humiliating logistical fiasco on the way to Kiev, Russia yet again fell back to its one certain advantage: firepower. In addition to Kiev, cities such as Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Odessa, and Kherson have endured heavy shelling and bombing throughout the war. The northern city of Chernihiv has reportedly been about 70% destroyed (CNN, 2022); Mariupol, like Grozny, has been almost entirely levelled after months of indiscriminate bombardment (New York Times, 2022). Russian assaults on Ukrainian cities also share similarities to Russia's urban fighting in Aleppo. Russian air support in the 2016 battle for Aleppo targeted residential houses, markets, and schools. In Syria, Russian officers maintained that all of their attacks focused on enemy infrastructure and logistic routes, blaming the anti-Assad forces for all targeting of civilians (Shemakov, 2022), just as Putin today denies Russia's large scale targeting of civilians in residential areas, hospitals, theatres and shopping malls (Cole, 2022) while simultaneously accusing the "Nazi-Ukrainian" government of genocide (Dickinson, 2022).

While most military experts have been somewhat surprised by the lack of competence and discipline and the poor tactical coordination revealed through the action of Russian forces in this war, Margarita Konaev and Kristin Brathwaite (2022) have cautioned against a too-strong focus on the Russian failures. They argue that the complications the Russians have been facing in this urbanized war reflect the challenges and difficulties any army can expect to face in urban warfare. Indeed, the urban locale is typically described as the most challenging and horrifying terrain an army can face (see, for example, DiMarco, 2012). Urban combat require sustained and advanced special training and experts seem to disagree on how well prepared the Russians really are for this. Gary Andersson (2022) indeed argues that the Russians are ill-prepared since Russian combined-arms doctrine advises against making cities primary objectives, and instead builds on the assumption that cities will simply surrender when the enemy's forces are defeated in the field. Andersson claims that while Russian special forces most likely get some training in urban combat, "there is no indication that the average conscript has any training in the physical and psychological rigors of street fighting" (Andersson, 2022). Roman Shemakov (2022), on the other hand, claims that since 2018, Russian military training has shifted focus and that it is now assumed in the Russian military that cities will represent the main battleground, and that several urban warfare training centres have in fact been built since then. A report from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) also states that Russia is expecting urban combat to become increasingly predominant, and that the Russian military has built new urban training grounds (Clark 2021, pp. 31–32). Even so, the Russian Armed Forces have not yet been able to establish basic capabilities for efficient urban combat such as effective infantry, adequate communications gear, reliable precision weapons, or well-trained officers – nor have they been able to synthesize their urban warfare doctrine (Clark 2021, p. 32). Indeed, the Russians have so far demonstrated low capabilities when it comes to street fighting inside Ukrainian cities. The type of close-quarter battles where cities are attacked street-by-street or even building-by-building through "micro-sieges" (King, 2021, p. 16) – that is, the type of urban battle that Western military organizations are primarily anticipating in urban wars yet to be fought – has not been predominant during the first few weeks and months of the war (Puri, 2022). There were initially a few reports of some more sophisticated Russian urban tactics and street fighting, after Russian paratroopers landed inside Kharkiv, for example (Aljazeera, 2022), but the preferred Russian model has instead been to pursue a brutal combination of medieval starvation siege warfare (see Hägerdal, 2020), combined with heavy indiscriminate bombardment in an attempt to force Ukraine into submission. Starvation through siege warfare is, as pointed out by Nils Hägerdal (2020, p. 2), certainly a time-honoured tactic. But Russia has taken siege warfare and weaponized hunger to an entirely new global level through its grain blockade (Shinkman, 2022).

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3 Yet another repetition of history can be found in relation to the invasion of Chechnya in the 1990s, where the majority of the Russian platoon leaders sent to lead the takeover of Grozny were recent military graduates, and many had been told they were going on a training mission, not on a sharp military intervention (Shemakov, 2022). Similar reports have flourished in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Harding, 2022).

In sum, and most likely due to a lack of competence in urban fighting, the Russian urban warfare model is to pulverize and weaken the city, then see troops move in to mop up – but this has proven to be difficult; as pointed out by Spencer and his colleagues (2022), “the paradox of urban warfare is that the more you bomb a city, the harder it is to take,” since rubble of concrete and steel becomes highly useful material for defenders to use in the blocking of streets, the preparation of ambushes, and for hiding explosive devices in – something the Ukrainians have exploited and done well. Sieges are also costly and time-consuming, and require secured surrounding territory to mitigate the risk of counter-attacks. The Russians have failed also in this respect, and the Ukrainians have therefore also been able to operate *from* the cities, using them as urbanized fortresses from which they have moved to deliver surprise attacks on the flanks and rear of Russian attackers using close defence and deep strikes (King, 2022b).

As the Russians shifted their strategy and redeployed to focus on conquering the Donbas provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, the street-by-street fighting has certainly increased and intensified. While the street fighting inside cities in this region has intensified, the Russians have nonetheless continued their indiscriminate bombing. According to some reports, the Ukrainians have as a response set out to deliberately draw the Russians into street fighting in order to neutralize their artillery advantage (Reuters, 2022).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Even though the urbanized war in Ukraine does not necessarily reflect urban war as anticipated by Western military organizations, there seem to be few true novelties in the urban warfare as conducted in Ukraine.

Throughout history, cities have had the status of battleground thrust upon them when weaker forces actively choose to take advantage of the city as a natural stronghold. The Ukraine forces have indeed done so, and developed an effective urban defence strategy, not only by exploiting the terrain to their advantage but also by using cities as old-fashioned medieval fortresses and bases of operation (King, 2022b). This urban defence strategy has also included arming untrained civilians and encouraging urban residents to make Molotov cocktails, which is problematic in several respects, not least since it makes civilians potential targets.

Russia’s urban warfare model, as we have seen in both Chechnya and Syria, is a brutal combination of siege warfare and indiscriminate bombardment of cities, including the deliberate targeting of civilians. Notions of “collateral damage” are far from sufficient to understand Russia’s urban warfare. It is uricide. The term does not merely refer to the impact of war on cities, or to the city simply as a theatre of violence; it refers to a particular form of violence in and against cities. It is the purposive killing of cities. The Ukrainian urbanized defence strategy, combined with Russia’s lack of respect for the laws of armed conflict, targeting of civilians and deliberate attacks on cities and the built environment, becomes an exceptionally deadly mix.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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