

# War in the city

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Personal safety in the city is in almost all instances a matter of everyday small-scale adjustments of individual behaviour and routine policing and intelligence gathering.

However very occasionally the city becomes a battlefield with extremely serious consequences for the lives and properties of citizens. The rarity of these occasions generally precludes prediction, reflection or preparation for avoidance or mitigation despite the extreme severity of the impacts upon personal safety. Despite the difficulties of demarcation this short contribution will be concerned exclusively with the relationship between the city and what is known as conventional war, conducted by regular forces under official command. Irregular and guerrilla warfare, or terrorism or aerial urban annihilation which may accompany and become difficult to distinguish from such operations will be excluded.

## Absence of attention

Given its devastating effects it is remarkable that so little attention has been paid to the conduct of war in cities. Sun Tsu advised tersely, 'avoid go around' while Clausewitz classed cities as only one variant of 'close country' impeding manoeuvre.

There are three main explanations for this neglect.

First, cities are unpopular battlegrounds for military commanders. They swallow up armies, absorbing and quickly exhausting personnel; the urban battle is difficult to control and unpredictable in its outcome; urban terrain is generally unsuited to other than short range weaponry and does not favour deployment as used by most professional armies in most time periods; it negates the professional armies key advantages of collective discipline, unit cohesion and combined arms.

Secondly, there is a reluctance to defend cities for reasons similar to those that deter attack. In addition the consequences for the lives and property of citizens are such that to defend a city was often tantamount to destroying it. This is politically unacceptable for a friendly city and even emotionally or diplomatically unacceptable for an enemy one.

Thirdly, as a consequence of the two above points there is in the long history of warfare just a paucity of cases each of them more or less unique. The military have little from which lessons could be learned or general principles drawn. While for urban planners and managers, the rarity of the occurrence, together perhaps with an understandable revulsion at its impacts when it does occur, has not encouraged a consideration of this topic.

## Nature of urban warfare

The characteristics of the city, including both its distinctive physical morphology and its functional structure, impinge in a number of important ways upon military operations in urban areas (what in military terminology is known as MOUT – Military operations in urban terrain). Some of the most important of these can be briefly summarised below.

The physical pattern of close set building blocks and networks of narrow often irregular, streets causes military units to fragment into relatively small entities and provides insufficient space for the mustering and deployment of large units. The urban battle typically disintegrates into a large number of small conflicts around individual buildings, squares, bridges and other defensive positions. A battle that is fought by squads and platoons relies heavily upon the initiative and motivation of the individual soldier and junior NCO. Consequently command control is difficult to maintain. There is a lack of communication along the line of command and often little reliable information to communicate. Each minor conflict will be fought in isolation and ignorance of the wider picture. Troops once committed will be difficult to either reinforce or withdraw and control of the battle for either side will be difficult. The particular strain of such small unit operations on the combat forces and the loss of control by commanders go a long way to explaining their unpopularity with both.

The morphology creates 'close country' which forecloses visibility and thus weapon ranges. Short ranges, generally less than 100m, have a number of consequences. They confine the conflict

largely to light hand held or thrown weapons. The tactical doctrine of combined arms, in particular supporting infantry with armour, artillery or air power is rendered difficult by the problem of target identification, differentiating between friendly and enemy positions and monitoring results. A paradox for an attacking force is that the use of heavy weaponry produces 'collateral damage' to buildings that reduces accessibility and target identification thus increasing defensive potential. The choice for an attacker is thus stand-off and bombard, hoping thereby to induce surrender or abandonment, or forego whatever advantages of firepower that might exist and engage with infantry in the city itself thus incurring all the above disadvantages. Cities by definition contain a dense concentration of civilian property, utilities and in all probability, lives. These will, at the very least, impede movement and disrupt the battle: they may also impose constraints on the nature of operations, fields of fire, and the use and targeting of weapons. They will also divert military manpower to their organisation and care. Potentially hostile civilians may add a further dimension of uncertainty by their potential guerrilla, sabotage and espionage roles which will require containment, although friendly civilians may be a source of local information.

As a result of the above it can be assumed that the urban battlefield absorbs large quantities of manpower in relation to its size. It can also be argued that it imposes such strains upon those engaged that it will exhaust manpower more quickly than other sorts of operations. Short ranges require a high degree of alertness and fast reactions which together with the lack of protected flanks and rear, the physical proximity of the enemy, the absence of visible supporting friendly units and consequent sense of isolation, the absence of a visible command structure and supportive officers, the known difficulty of withdrawal or reinforcement and a reluctance to accept individual surrender, all tend to increase the tensions experienced by the soldier (Keegan, 1976). This leads to a faster rate of exhaustion and a need, if possible, to rotate units, thus increasing the amount of manpower needed.

Although these factors effect defence as well as attack, they on balance favour defence and have contributed to the deeply held conviction that the city is a defensive terrain. An attack / defence manpower ratio of as much as 10:1 has been suggested from Second World War experience (O'Sullivan & Miller, 1983). To a very large extent this can be related to the morphological structure and constituents of the urban battlefield itself. The closely packed buildings offer many positions easily adapted, strengthened and camouflaged possibilities for defensive infantry positions, which are similarly difficult to attack. In particular armour and other mobile forces have difficulties in such an environment both because of limited accessibility for wheeled or tracked vehicles, which is, likely to deteriorate further as the battle proceeds, and their vulnerability to attack at close range by hand held weapons. The sheer complexity of the urban network of roads, passages, spaces, sewers and the like favours local familiarity which is more likely to be held by those in possession than of the ground than those disputing it. Thus in summary not only is the urban terrain likely to favour defenders over attackers, it is also more favourable to lightly than heavily armed forces, static than mobile forces and even more irregular than regular forces.

### **History/ experience of war in city**

Cities have in history fulfilled many defence roles. They have been the cause of conflict; the scene of insurgency activities from civil unrest, through terrorism to guerrilla warfare; and been the hostages to bombardment and ultimate annihilation to force a military decision. However urban warfare, in the limited sense used here, has occurred in two main forms.

#### *The siege*

Most historical examples fall into this category of warfare, in which the objective was the city but conflict was conducted around rather than within it. In most historical periods sieges were conducted according to strictly understood rules developed because they were in the direct practical interests of both attacker and defender. These governed to what extent and for how long a city was permitted to resist. Once the fortifications had been breached or an agreed period of time waiting for relief had elapsed then the city was compelled to surrender and could claim some 'honours of war', including usually quarter for defenders and inhabitants. Failure to abide by such rules removed all conventional protection for the lives and property of defenders and citizens. The existence of such conventions demonstrates the distaste felt by those who constructed them towards fighting in cities by providing an acceptable means of avoiding it.

The historical cases where destruction of the city and the massacre of its inhabitants occurred are relatively few, and have acquired their historical notoriety and contemporary shock value because of their rarity. Incidences such as Carthage (BC146), Jerusalem (AD70), Haarlem and Naarden (1572),

Magdeburg (1631) or Wexford (1649) spring so rapidly to mind just because they were so rare and thus so memorable. It is worth noting that the propagation of this shock was frequently in the interests of both the perpetrators, as deterrent, and victims, as stimulation to revenge. The use made of the heritage of such atrocities is considered at length in Tunbridge & Ashworth (1994). In any event these incidences most frequently occurred after fighting had been conducted, for one reason or another, in the city itself in breach of the conventions or because one participant was excluded from their coverage.

### *The urban battle*

Fighting by regular armies inside the city is historically rare if only because the opportunities were until recently limited by the rarity and small size of cities. Many such fights were small scale skirmishes (Winchester, 1141, Salisbury, 1644 or Preston 1715), occasions when fighting in open country spilled over into a neighbouring city (Lewes, 1264) or were initiated by some form of insurgency where only one side were regular forces (Green, 1976). Some such cases from different time periods include the revolt of the Flemish cities against their feudal overlord at the end of the thirteenth century, the Paris Commune insurgency repressed by government troops (1871) and the involvement of British-Indian army units in the Indonesian insurgency at Soerabaya (1945).

The medieval and early modern period provide few cases but in the post-Napoleonic period, although there are larger cities, warfare has become more mobile and less positional. Despite a number of notable sieges (Sevastopol, 1853-5; Metz and Belfort, 1870-1; Plevna, 1878; Port Arthur, 1904-5; Przemysl, 1915-6), few cases of urban conflict can be found. Even the Second World War provides few examples. Stalingrad was the notable exception with the battle being impelled on both sides by symbolic rather than military necessities (Erikson, 1975). Rostow (1942), Caen/Bayeux (1944), Budapest (1944-5) and Berlin (1945) also had large symbolic values. The two Warsaw uprisings (Jewish Ghetto 1943 & Home Army 1944) were both fought in the city itself of necessity rather than choice. Only rarely did attacking forces choose an urban battlefield and the most notable examples are all airborne forces attempting to take and hold, often without success, transport nodes located in cities (e.g. the Rotterdam Maas crossing and central Netherlands airfield in 1940; the 'Market Garden' landings at Nijmegen and Arnhem in 1944). All were attempts to seize communication nodes in the cities not the cities themselves. The even more remarkable point is that retreating armies rarely used the defensive potential of cities. The list of cities that were not defended in these circumstances is very long; it would include those in France and Belgium in 1940, Singapore and Manila in 1942, Kiev and Lwow in 1941-2. The reluctance of retreating armies to defend friendly cities is more understandable than the failure of such armies to defend enemy cities as in the long German African/ European retreat of 1943-5.

In the post-war world both NATO and the Warsaw pact assumed for 40 years that fighting on the central front would be conducted largely in urban and suburban environments. The former assumed that the cities of West Germany would be key defensive positions while the latter regarded cities as obstacles to be masked and detoured around. Fortunately neither of these assumptions, nor the resulting training for short range battle, was tested.

Most recent urban conflicts have been clashes of one or more insurgent, irregular forces (such as, Beirut 1975-89; Mogadishu, 1993; Baku 1990; Successor Yugoslavia at, among other places, the Kraijina, Vukovar, Osijek 1991-4 and Pristina, 1998-9; Grozny, 1994-6,1999). The two most recent major conflicts, that in the Persian Gulf (1990-1) and Iraq (2003) were notable for their avoidance of urban warfare. Aerial bombardment of urban targets was used extensively by attacking forces in both but the first was fought entirely outside urban areas and the second, with the exception of the initial assault on Umm Qasr, largely bypassed the cities with mobile units until Baghdad was reached. Subsequently urban operations have consisted of regular, often armoured, coalition forces, with close air support, confronting irregular and terrorist units.

The paradox is that cities are highly unlikely to experience these events with any regularity or at all. However, it is salutary to remind those who have experienced only 'the piping times of peace' that cities are from time to time the arena of fierce and deadly conflict which, when it occurs, imposes upon citizens the most serious, far reaching and long-term assault upon their right to safety in the city.

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