

Block by Block:

The Challenges of Urban Operations

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U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press
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Preface

It is axiomatic in the military community that operations in an urban environment should be avoided if at all possible, given the costs they exact in time, personnel, casualties, and materiel. Yet, throughout history, cities have continuously been at the center of a variety of military undertakings: sieges, street fighting, coups de main, peace-keeping and peace enforcement, stability operations and support operations, and disaster and humanitarian relief. Moreover, this trend continues through the recent past and up to the present as headlines concerning Beirut, Sarajevo, Mogadishu, Grozny, Kabul, and Baghdad indicate.

Given my choice in such matters, I would echo the words of an old song sung by Johnny Cash, among others. The chanted chorus implores, "Don't take your guns to town, son. Leave your guns at home, Bill." Unfortunately, soldiers are not always given that option as a valid course of action. Recognizing that armies cannot always bypass cities, the U.S. military since the mid-1990s has experienced a resurgence of interest in urban operations. As one indication of this renewed attention, the Commander, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), tasked the Combat Studies Institute (CSI), Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to research and write several in-depth case studies that would provide historical perspectives on the subject. The case studies were to be used for professional development and coursework in all TRADOC schools.

To determine the exact scope of this assignment and the kinds of operations that should be included, I, as CSI's director, met with Dr. Roger J. Spiller, the George C. Marshall Professor of Military History at USACGSC; Dr. William G. Robertson, the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center historian; and Dr. Lawrence A. Yates, CSI's research coordinator. During the meeting, the group reached consensus on the case studies to be examined and determined that the authors of each would come from officer and civilian scholars at Fort Leavenworth. I placed Dr. Robertson in charge of the project as its general editor, with Dr. Yates working closely as managing editor.

The resulting anthology begins with a general overview of urban operations from ancient times to the midpoint of the twentieth century. It then details ten specific case studies of U.S., German, and Japanese operations in cities during World War II and ends with more recent Russian attempts to subdue Chechen fighters in Grozny and the Serbian siege of Sarajevo. Operations range across the spectrum from combat to

humanitarian and disaster relief. Each chapter contains a narrative account of a designated operation, identifying and analyzing the lessons that remain relevant today. Before inclusion in this CGSC Press publication, the final draft of each chapter appeared on CSI's website at <<http://cgsc.leavenworth.army.mil/CSI/research/MOUT/urbanoperationsintro.asp>>. The chapters will remain on CSI's publications website for those who cannot readily access the printed book.

In his foreword, retired General Donn A. Starry, U.S. Army, reflects on the relevance of urban operations today. Dr. Spiller ably reinforces this position in an in-depth conclusion that pulls together the themes of the various chapters while introducing additional issues. It is hoped that today's military professional, as well as interested parties within the general public, will find these studies stimulating and informative. For a more conceptual look at cities and how they affect and are affected by military operations, see Dr. Spiller's *Sharp Corners*, which CSI published in 2001 and can also be found on the CSI publications website.

LAWYN C. EDWARDS

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Foreword

History instructs that for a variety of reasons, cities have always been targets for attack by adversaries. From the earliest of times, attackers came bearing weapons ranging from knives, arrows, and spears, while in modern times, they have brought weaponry the Industrial Revolution made available: cannon, rocket artillery, and ultimately bombs and rockets delivered from aerial platforms and even thermonuclear warheads, not to mention the potential for chemical and biological payloads. In turn, cities have responded to most of these threats. Early on, for example, they thickened city walls and erected other barriers to entry. But attackers seeking to subdue the cities simply countered with new and better weapons. So the game of measures and countermeasures—the adult, and much more deadly, version of the familiar children’s game of rock, scissors, paper—has continued apace for centuries.

A post-1945 visitor to the Allied zones of occupation in Western Europe who had not been on the scene to view firsthand the events of the long war just ended would have immediately noticed several striking features of the landscape. Above all, many, if not most, of the large cities lay in ruin. By one count there were seventy-two such places, virtually all famous, old, large, important. Those cities not destroyed were severely damaged. The Allies had pounded them with strategic and tactical aerial bombing, reduced them to rubble by artillery and sometimes by ground action, consumed them with fire (Hamburg and Dresden), or finally, moving to the Pacific theater in the case of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, atomized them.

Several of these western cities had been bombed flat on the premise that if the city were “rubbled,” the resultant demoralization of the working population would adversely affect factory output in that city. Virtually nowhere, however, did such attacks have the predicted effects. The true cost in aircrews and aircraft lost to demonstrate that this operational concept was a seriously flawed hypothesis from the outset was high indeed. Operationally, many cities became targets for destruction purely for political reasons. Remember Berlin. As Antony Beevor dramatically recounts in *The Fall of Berlin 1945*, Joseph Stalin had to have the city for revenge, and for revenge, his armies pillaged, plundered, and raped their way through Berlin’s alleys, streets, and undergrounds. Winston Churchill saw Berlin as a political target, necessary for postwar diplomatic clout. General Dwight D. Eisenhower demurred on military grounds because he believed taking Berlin was no

longer considered an important objective and thought instead that defeating German armies in the field was the primary goal. Because Churchill linked military concerns to a larger political framework, it is likely that Carl von Clausewitz would have sided with Churchill's position. Because Eisenhower's position focused more on strictly military considerations and less on political factors, Henri de Jomini probably would have agreed with Eisenhower. It is doubtful a civilized person would have sided with Stalin.

Our postwar visitor, in looking around, would see other cities, some quite large, that had seen little if any obvious combat damage. Further, while some smaller towns and villages showed evidence of combat, many, if not most, appeared relatively untouched. But even in urban areas where the visitor encountered extensive damage, it would soon become apparent that many essential functions of the city were still operating, albeit with difficulty. Water and electricity were available; food could be had; populations had gone underground, surviving and living in cellars; and people got to the work place or what was left of it. Not to oversimplify the trauma but simply to state facts, things went on somehow. Postwar Mannheim, for example, leveled in a strategic/operational bombing campaign predicted to demoralize the population and deprive the industrial base of workers, featured a postwar population of cellar dwellers who, while uncomfortable, were living, eating, sleeping, and still working.

Returning to Western Europe ten years later, the visitor would be struck by the extent to which these cities had recovered from their war damage. Marshall Plan dollars and an inherently industrious population had worked wonders. Twenty years later, evidence of war damage was largely limited to remains of buildings left standing as monuments in remembrance of the war: the tower of Berlin's ancient Kaiser Wilhelm Kirche along the Kurfurstendam, for example. New, vibrant cities had emerged from the ruins of the old, a process not entirely unlike that found throughout ancient history when a new city was simply placed on top of another that had been destroyed. The visitor would have observed that cities are not inanimate assemblages of buildings and facilities, but instead, they are more like living things, conceived and born by some means for some reason. They grow and they mature. Some thrive; some become ill and recover. Some die and are forgotten, and some are destroyed and rebuilt. Not only are cities themselves living systems but also they are composed of supporting interstitial systems: water, food, power, communications, transportation, manufacturing, economic, commercial, entertainment, and many others.

Interestingly, those infrastructure systems have seldom been the primary targets of military attack. It is difficult to find a historical example of an attack on a city planned as an operation against a living system, an attack against interstitial and interrelated systems in the organic infrastructure. In looking for insight into such an approach, Dr. James Grier Miller's theory of living systems is indispensable. Its hypothesis is that cells, organisms, organs, animals, humans, organizations—indeed cities—all display common functional characteristics. Understanding the framework of functional systems then provides a parametric baseline for tactical operations against villages and towns and for operational- or strategic-level attacks against large cities. This is in contrast to the little, mock villages created at many U.S. military installations as training sites for urban operations. These are in no way adequate for teaching military operators and planners about attacking large, “living” cities. Nor are they adequate for developing alternatives to bypassing or mounting a conventional military operation against an urban area.

Considering alternatives, operationally as well as tactically, there are families of nonlethal weapons that, when properly employed, can obviate the need for attack using “hard,” or kinetic, means. Experiments with enhanced flux nuclear, enhanced blast, and thermobaric devices are currently under way. “Soft” power, as opposed to “hard” power, both discussed by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. in *The Paradox of American Power*, suggests useful nonkinetic alternate strategies.² This concept is not especially new as demonstrated by Julius Caesar's *The Civil War*, an account of the great commander's campaigns in Spain during the Roman Civil War.³ In it, he demonstrates dramatically how it is possible to prevail over determined enemies without laying waste to their cities.

In situations where attacking forces cannot avoid kinetic means, the lessons of the past should not be applied to the future without modification. For example, there is some evidence that transitioning from tactical to operational to strategic levels of war, especially in urban conflict, is confused by transit zones that are more fractal than linear. Operational boundaries may appear quite linear, especially intellectually; so, indeed, might strategic divisions. At the tactical level, however, Benoit Mandelbrot's fractal calculus is far more illuminating a tool than is the essentially linear calculus traditional to virtually all battle (tactical) games and simulations. All is well in one city block, but all hell rages two blocks over. The first floor is cleared here, but why are the miserable illegitimates dropping cocktails on us from two floors above and

firing rocket-propelled grenades at us from the cellars below? If the village is afire above ground and the people are gone, why are we taking fire from out of the ground? “By golly, we just may have to destroy this town to save it!” in the words of one Vietnam-era warrior.

In short, there is a need for the U.S. military to explore new ways of conceptualizing urban operations. But that exploration must be grounded, in part, in the empirical data contained in the historical record. Our judgments about the future must be informed by our experiences of the past. And that is what the variety of historical case studies in this book offer: a solid factual and analytical basis on which to conceptualize future urban operations. These studies should not wed today’s analysts to traditional ideas and concepts but should serve rather as a “reality check” when those analysts discuss new approaches to the age-old problem of conducting operations on urban terrain and attempt to answer such questions as: How might we expect to have to fight future battles, if any, in cities? Against whom and under what conditions might we expect to fight? What capabilities are resident in the forces and equipment of the threat(s) we might expect to encounter? What does technology offer in terms of countering a threat or providing a margin of capability over an anticipated threat?

Having answered all those interrogatives crisply and with precision, some additional thoughts might be: What capabilities are required in terms of combat equipment—weapons, vehicles, aircraft, and functional systems? What force structures and organizations might be best suited to the operational environment we anticipate? How should soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen be trained to fight in city environments? What tactics, techniques, and procedures are essential knowledge at tactical and operational levels of war? How are units to be trained for the new environment? How are noncommissioned officers to be educated and trained to perform their essential duties at small-unit levels? How do we educate and train officers who are to lead the forces to plan and train for operations at tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war?

With these questions in mind, the following collection of works will assist military professionals and thoughtful scholars alike in better understanding the complexities of urban combat, an area whose importance grows more urgent for study with each passing day.

General Donn A. Starry
U.S. Army, Retired

Notes

1. James Grier Miller, *Living Systems* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, May 1995) and Miller, *Measurement and Interpretation in Accounting: A Living Systems Theory Approach* (Westport CT: Quorum Books, 25 October 1989).
2. *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2002).
3. Julius Caesar, *The Civil War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

