

Combat in Cities

Anthony Harrigan

Conditioned by the combat experience of World War II, which involved large-scale conflict on open battlefields or across beaches, Americans have tended to ignore the problems associated with fighting in cities. The basic assumption has been that military action would not take place in an urban environment. The United States has no Stalingrad in her national past—no epochal battle fought within the confines of a city. Struggles such as the Warsaw rising, the Hungarian revolt against

Communist rule, and the internal combat of the Algerian cities in the 1950's are alien to our operational history.

However, recent happenings—chiefly the sensitive operation in Santo Domingo—have pointed up the necessity of taking a fresh look at combat in cities. Experiences such as terrorism against Americans in Saigon to subversive warfare in friendly Latin countries indicate the range of conflict situations with which the United States and her allies may be confronted in an era of revolutionary strife.



Historically, combat in cities has gone from one end to the other of the scale of intensity. Stalingrad—which led to the capture by the Soviets of a large German Army—was the largest battle fought in a city in modern times. The struggle of the Hungarian freedom fighters against Soviet armored formations in Budapest in 1956 is not usually treated as a military operation. The French attempt to hold cities in Algeria in the 1950s likewise has usually been discussed from the political standpoint rather than its military aspects.

The fact is that many of the key conflicts of the last 20 years of cold war have taken place in towns and cities rather than in the countryside which is supposed to be the home of revolutionary forces. The late 1940s, for example, saw governments in Rome and Paris threatened by organized mob strife that was a form of war from within. Vast crowds, bent on the overthrow

of anti-Communist regimes, were regularly deployed in Europe in this period to give the Soviet Union a political breakthrough in the West. Fortunately, the French and Italian police and armed forces managed to contain the destructive demonstrations and prevent the spread of violence.

Urban Revolutionists

Latin America continues to be an area in which Communist revolutionaries commit sabotage in cities and generally carry on a part-time guerrilla war in an urban environment. In Venezuela, the National Liberation Front moved in from the countryside in September 1965. Guerrilla-terrorists killed eight policemen and wounded two others in Caracas during a 10-day period. In October these urban terrorists blasted two major crude oil lines and sabotaged pumping equipment.

Earlier in the summer the existence of a highly secret Communist subversion guide was revealed in Guatemala. The document called for student strikes in Guatemala City, occupation of the universities and colleges, and the carrying out of demonstrations and strikes. It stated that urban revolutionists must organize meetings at the university, provide acts of support, paint the walls, write and distribute leaflets, and flood the city with expressions of support of the guerrillas. Shortly after this document was revealed, the Guatemalan armed forces swooped down to capture a bomb and grenade workshop and a guerrilla training school in Guatemala City. Captured in the raids was a large cache of weapons.

It seems clear that urban terrorism is a growing problem for the troops of allied and friendly nations, as well as for US Armed Forces. Organized mob action is an equally serious military problem.

Police Methods

In dealing with terrorists, troops have much to learn from police methods. The most important element in successful antiterrorist action is intelligence. Careful interrogation of suspects, use of informers and rewards, and reliance upon identification papers and other records—standard police methods the world over—have to be utilized by troops confronted with a problem of terrorism.

Intensive, surprise searches of a given area, with interrogation of all the occupants of an apartment



house on a particular block, can yield rewards. The police dragnet procedure is a part of this type of combat in a city. Inspection, performed either on a regular or random basis, can achieve results. In Saigon, for instance, terrorists sometimes have placed explosives inside the tubular frames of bicycles. The aim of counterterrorist military action in cities should be to separate the terrorist from his base in the population—to make the populace unwilling to give him refuge.

In dealing with mobs the basic rule is to employ a minimum of force rather than the maximum at a unit's disposal. This rule for one type of combat in cities is contrary to the training soldiers receive for more conventional types of action, and special training is necessary for mob handling. Of course, delay in the use of force, when it is needed, can persuade a mob that it has control of a situation. But self-discipline on the part of troops remains the key element. The aim of riot control training is to remove emotional, spontaneous reactions so as to eliminate the sparks that can ignite a mob.

Large Force Required

There are many aspects of military operations in cities that need to be discussed among soldiers and in the public arena. It is understood that a large force of troops is required to track down a comparatively small force of guerrillas in the countryside. But there should be better understanding of the need for large numbers

of troops in a situation such as that in Santo Domingo. Patrolling, establishing roadblocks, manning machinegun positions at key points—these and other responsibilities require considerable manpower in a city conflict.

Beyond such military actions—or police actions as they are sometimes called—there is the condition of allout combat in cities. One such urban battle was the struggle

for Seoul in Korea. The arduous character of the fighting should not pass from the consciousness of the US soldier. Any city offers tremendous opportunities for defense. In Seoul, US forces moved into the city down main thoroughfares. The Communists fought at almost every intersection, using roadblocks of rice bags filled with sand and backed up by antitank guns. Burke Davis, in an illuminating account of warfare inside a city, describes how the troops moved forward:

Barricades grew larger as they advanced and the infantry worked out a pattern with the engineers: Riflemen crawled to windows and roof tops and alleyways and drove defenders behind the barricade; engineers ran into the streets, located mines. ... Troops took cover as explosions rocked the street. Then tanks came in. The enemy broke from the roadblock to flee wildly down the street—only to fall before the machine guns and heavier tank weapons. The troops spent about 45 minutes on each barricade in the process.

In front of this ground assault force, American aircraft flew at rooftop level, blasting the enemy with bombs and napalm.

Studying all types of combat experiences in cities can produce valuable lessons. For example, it should not be thought that cities can endure modern warfare for only short periods. The story of Reims, France, in World War I illustrates the endurance of an urban population in a war zone. For nearly four years Reims was under enemy fire as the French and Germans contested the city. Of Reims' 14,000 houses, only about 60 were immediately habitable at the end of hostilities.

Although there were short respites, Reims led the life of a besieged community for almost four years. The Germans increased the caliber of their shells and varied their modes of bombardment, sometimes firing for a few hours, sometimes 24 hours a day at the rate of one shell every three minutes, or again only at night. Sometimes three-inch shells would be used exclusively. At other times, the Germans fired eight-inch, 12-inch, and 15-inch shells. Explosive and incendiary shells were used, as well as bombs and poison gas.

On Good Friday 1917 almost 7,500 shells fell in the city. During this period of warfare, a considerable portion of the population persisted in staying in Reims. Work continued in the bombarded city with the people courageously adapting themselves to the danger. Municipal courts and other public services

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were installed in cellars that also served as barracks for the populace.

The Spanish Civil War of the 1930s continued for a long period because of loyalist control of and resistance in the city of Madrid.

The key move was the dispatch of six loyalist battalions to Madrid under command of General Valentin Gonzalez, known as *El Campesino*. In his autobiography, he states:

The decisive days were Nov. 6-9

(1936). But many people in our own camp did not realize that they might be decisive, because they had given Madrid up for lost. The world expected the fall of Madrid from one hour to the next. And the world should have been right; Madrid was ripe to fall. It should have fallen, if the men, women and children had not united to save it, as no civilians had ever united in defense of their homes.

Urban warfare has produced unique weapons such as the high-pressure water tanks the East Germans have used to control crowds and the homemade armored vehicles Greek Cypriots fashioned from farm tractors. Students of combat in cities can find



Most acts of terrorism in a city, such as this bombing of the US Embassy in Saigon, are part of a coordinated program. (US Army)

a lode of treasure in obscure conflicts. One of these is the Lithuanian resistance to the Soviet People's Commissariat for International Affairs (NKVD) military formations in 1945-46. The Lithuanians built bunkers inside towns and cities, fired on NKVD garrison buildings, ambushed Soviet city officials, and conducted a remarkable activist campaign until submerged by a tide of Soviet military manpower.

It behooves Americans, who face an extraordinary array of military challenges in the various regions of the world, to study anew the art of warfare in cities—whether waged in conventional or terrorist-guerrilla fashion.

To view "Combat in Cities" as it was originally published in May 1966, visit <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/JF-22/Original/Harrigan.pdf>.