



Smoke rises over the Ukrainian capital Kyiv after Russia unleashed a barrage of deadly missile attacks on cities across Ukraine as part of a wave of strikes against civilians and infrastructure in October 2022. This photo reveals the massive concentration of population together with industry, manufacturing, road networks, bridges, and electricity-generating facilities that make urban centers essential terrain for adversaries attempting to assert geographical, political, and economic control during periods of conflict. (Photo by Ukrinform, Alamy Live News)

# Decided among the Cities

## The Past, Present, and Future of War in Urban Environments

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Cities not only possess cultural and psychological value for combatants, but they are also sociologically and geographically anchored to multiple aspects of military key terrain. Cities sit astride, near, or encompass major ground routes (road and rail), major water crossings such as large bridges, and logistical and power projection hubs for sea and air. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine provides an immediate example of the importance of cities themselves and what cities contain. Moreover, the importance of cities is apparent with a study of history. However, even with history and current events, there is faint acknowledgement of the importance of the urban fight in military theory, and it has limited coverage in U.S. Army doctrine. When acknowledged, urban operations are largely discussed in commentary on their inherent difficulty, the natural aversion to costly fighting characteristic of urban combat, and with the recommenda-

tion to bypass or avoid city fights altogether.

However, as history and recent examples in Ukraine demonstrate, conflicts often are decided among the cities. The physical and infrastructure characteristics of cities naturally and geographically can make control of them critical for victorious military campaigns.

The one who can seize and hold the city controls, or just denies, crucial capabilities to military operations.

Early observations indicate Russia's war in Ukraine hangs in the balance and appears it will be won or lost in the cities. Ukraine's defiance in the north-east, holding Kyiv and denying Russian advances in Chernihiv

and Kharkiv, altered Russia's operational calculus.<sup>1</sup> The prolonged resistance in Mariupol consumed multiple Russian tactical battle groups that could have been better employed to support other offensives; the stoutest resistance for weeks was in the four square miles of the Azvostol Steel Plant with its complex, dense collection of buildings and intricate woven underground passageways.<sup>2</sup> Even the seemingly casualty-accepting Russian President Vladimir Putin called off further offensive advances into the plant to preserve Russian lives.<sup>3</sup> While the overall performance of the Russian military has surprised many, its poor performance in urban fighting has not. Russian forces were unprepared for much of this war, but most distinctly for urban operations.<sup>4</sup> While they had attempted to modernize in platforms and weapon systems, their military training and organization from the short-term conscript system to the lack of a definitive noncommissioned officer corps set them up for failure beyond combined arms to also include in urban terrain.<sup>5</sup>

## The Symbolically Driven Fights over Cities

The battle for Kyiv mattered as a symbolic Russian attempt to delegitimize Ukrainian sovereignty and swiftly conduct regime change. History is replete with examples of the importance of cities, both successful and failed attempts from Carthage and Rome in the Carthaginian Wars to Richmond in the American Civil War, and to a more modern example of Baghdad in Operation Iraqi Freedom.<sup>6</sup> The symbolism of cities as a wartime measure of psychological importance and their influence on morale even expands beyond that of a simplistic capital city sociopolitical center-of-gravity concept. Other cities draw decisive battles beyond capitals. For Ukraine and Russia, Mariupol became a symbol of resistance with a distinct past as it had been a city that changed hands in 2014.<sup>7</sup> These so-called "hero cities" in the current war have evolved beyond the importance of their physical terrain and into cities with psychological and morale importance all their own. This status further draws forces into city fighting not only to secure the physical terrain that may or may not be operationally or strategically important but also because the mere resistance to capture from the city has grown to be seen as symbolically important. In history, a city of similar psychological importance stands out

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from the Second World War: Stalingrad.<sup>8</sup> And in an Asia-Pacific example, the fierce urban fight over Manila during Gen. Douglas A. MacArthur's Philippines liberation campaign shows a city's importance in drawing armies into an unwanted urban fight.<sup>9</sup>

A military's tactical inability to successfully wage urban warfare, whether it wants to or not, can have decidedly psychological and morale impacts on the larger operational and strategic, even political, aspects of the conflict. But cities have an unavoidable effect over wartime success beyond the symbolic or political. The symbolic can be managed by deftly skilled information operations, and politically potent targets can always be moved. Capital cities have fallen in the past, but combatants stubbornly kept fighting, such as the evacuation of Moscow in 1812 and again in 1941, and the burning of Washington, D.C., in the War of 1812. However, the loss of these capitals did not end their respective wars.<sup>10</sup>

## The Logistics-Driven Fights over Cities

Over time, cities naturally grow up around major ground lines of communication. Lines of communication can be militarily key terrain, and their possession can decide operational success or failure. Russian logistics are driven by rail.<sup>11</sup> Ukrainian cities of Sumy, Chernihiv, Kharkiv, and Izyum across the northeast and east of the country matter because they contain or are near railheads. Seizing these rail hubs is a must for Russia, and these railheads naturally exist within urban environments. Russia had to seize the crucial rail areas associated with Sumy, Chernihiv, and Kharkiv in its opening northeastern operation to take Kyiv. Russia's failure or delays in securing these cities with their surrounding infrastructure interrupted and contributed to its logistical failures, resulting in its inability to advance and successfully envelop Kyiv. Russia's tactical failures resulted in an aborted northeastern operation at Kyiv and a shifted strategic focus because of the inability to take certain cities.

Cities naturally form around railheads. During the American Civil War, and building up to then Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's Vicksburg campaign, the critical seizure of the railroad hub city of Corinth cut off rebel supply and reinforcements from Vicksburg and opened those same lines to the U.S. Army's continued encirclement of the river bastion city.<sup>12</sup> During World War II,

the Allies' strategic bombing campaign revolved in part around targeting logistical hubs, specifically found in large cities, in accordance with air power theorists such as Giulio Douhet and Billy Mitchell.<sup>13</sup> While admittedly not winning the war solely from the air by bombing these railways, it disrupted Axis efforts and supported the Allies' ground forces' seizure of those cities.

Road network hubs, much like rail hubs, also commonly have urban development in their immediate vicinity, which is a natural sociological and economic condition. As Russia withdrew from its initial Kyiv access and refocused on the eastern Donbas region, extensive road network intersections such as those around the small city of Izyum became important, leading to multiple operations and counteroffensives to fight over these road intersection cities. Much like the importance of Bastogne during the Second World War, the resistance and contest over Izyum played into Russia's encirclement attempts.<sup>14</sup> Contemporary motorized and armored armies require hard surface roads to provide the high-demand sustainment for large-scale combat and flexibility in operational maneuver. Without securing multiple road networks and hubs, forces are even more anchored to railways, airfields, and ports.

Additionally, large inland waterways spanned by extensively reinforced heavy-tonnage bridges commonly are in or near developed cities. Historical examples of the importance of major bridges crossing large bodies of water include the World War II failures at Arnhem during Operation Market Garden and the successful seizure of the bridge over the Rhine in Remagen.<sup>15</sup> In the opening push of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the First Marine Division's plan revolved around the seizure of An Nasiriyah and holding the large bridge over the Euphrates.<sup>16</sup> And bridges and their surrounding urban development have become a common scene of major fighting in the Donbas theater of the Ukraine conflict around the devastated city of Sievierodonetsk.<sup>17</sup> Fights for cities span more than just railroad hubs, road networks, seaports, and airfields to support sustainment; they increase in importance in their broader, even more critical role as power projection sites, inherently dominated by the urban sprawl that inevitably grows around major ports and airfields. Moreover, the seizure and security of the cities either through direct action or encircling efforts reduced resistance.



Infantrymen of the 3rd Armored Division advance under artillery fire in Pont-Le-Ban, Belgium, 15 January 1945. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)

## The Power Projection and Resistance Fights over the Cities

The Russian efforts in Mariupol and Odesa along Ukraine's southern coast center on their importance as port cities to the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea, respectively.<sup>18</sup> These ports and their outgrowth urban environments influence the security of the Russian Black Sea fleet based out of Crimea, control shipborne export/import trade, and are directly tied to military operations over-the-water logistics and power projection of forces. Russia expended significant effort in taking Mariupol by creating its land bridge from Crimea to Russia and sealing off the Sea of Azov. It also served as a symbolic victory over Ukrainian resistance but at a heavy cost. Even as Russia is suffering limitations in operational reach, it still threatens Odesa as another major Black Sea port it desires to further cut Ukraine off territorially from the sea. Control of these ports would allow Russia to project power from the Black Sea fleet with troop and logistics movements from what is still contested key terrain.

The American Civil War's coastal actions demonstrate the importance of securing an opponent's coastline and cutting them off, which involved efforts against cities. In these cases, it was not about Charleston,

Wilmington, or New Orleans specifically, though the fall of each had significant additional benefits beyond port access. It was about cutting off the rebel southern states from trade and transport.

Similarly, in the Second World War, the Allied efforts to besiege Brest also exemplifies the urban actions involved in seizing critical, large ports. It was more about having port access to supply the ground forces in Western Europe than to control the cities of Brest, Le Havre, Antwerp, or Cherbourg. Ports dominated the logistical calculus for strategic advances and drove operational planning.<sup>19</sup> The siege of Brest and the efforts to take Cherbourg after the successful Normandy landings regulated the advances across Western Europe. Even Adolf Hitler's

final major offensive across the Ardennes, however improbable, had prioritized the targeting of the large city port of Antwerp as the focal point to cripple the Allies' advance.<sup>20</sup>

Manila serves as another example. Commodore George Dewey seized the harbor at the opening of the Spanish-American War but had to wait for the arrival of a ground force to then envelop and take the port by land.<sup>21</sup> As exemplified by Manila, any power projection operations in the Asia-Pacific will necessarily be designed around ports across the various archipelagos and littoral regions, which inherently are encompassed by built-up urban areas required to be taken to hold and operate the seaports.

Airports fall into the same category as seaports in that they are a means to rapidly envelop and project combat power quickly, forward operate air support, and again serve as logistics centers. Large-capacity airports are commonly located around cities. An example of the critical importance of such airfields is the ferocious, back-and-forth fighting over the Hostomel airfield in the outer suburbs of Kyiv during the opening days of the war.<sup>22</sup> It was the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting early in the war, and some of Russia's best troops were sacrificed during their efforts to take



A marine with Regimental Combat Team 6 patrols the streets of Fallujah, Iraq, while fellow marines, Iraqi soldiers, and Iraqi police distribute food to the people during Operation Alljah on 8 August 2007. (Photo by Cpl. Samuel Corum, U.S. Army)

it to flow in more troops quickly for a rapid thrust on Kyiv. In Operation Just Cause, the rapid seizure of the Panamanian airport to flow in additional U.S. forces was crucial to the operation and involved incursions into the city.<sup>23</sup> For Operation Iraqi Freedom, there were early planning efforts for airborne and air assaults to take then Saddam International Airport prior to the unexpectedly rapid mechanized operations into Baghdad that took the airport and opened it to coalition use.<sup>24</sup> Operations utilizing these airports involved control of the surrounding cities through urban operations. The larger the city, the larger the airport, and the more sizable platforms and higher numbers of aircraft it can take. If large, paved airports are needed, urban operations will be included in their control.

Lastly, resistance fighters are becoming more urban. No longer is effective guerrilla activity springing up in the woods; it is originating in the urban sprawl of cities. Kherson is but one example of this in the current Ukrainian conflict, where Russia is experiencing significant resistance activities against its imposed occupational government.<sup>25</sup> This is largely because the

nature of urban terrain strongly benefits the resistance in anonymity, access to media, presence of civilian congestion ripe for information operations and messaging for exploitation of occupiers' overreaction, manipulated disinformation of occupier actions, or even fictitious actions. Whereas in open, uncongested, and less dense terrain, reconnaissance and surveillance technologies strongly benefit the counter guerrilla for locating, tracking, and targeting resistance forces, the ability for guerillas to hide in urban sprawl neutralizes much of those technologies.<sup>26</sup>

## A Cautionary Conclusion

Even with the importance of the city fight demonstrated in warfare throughout history, the U.S. military swings back and forth in placing emphasis on understanding urban warfare and how to effectively conduct it. Intellectually, the U.S. Army's former Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG) filled a learning and training gap for the U.S. Army regarding combat in dense urban terrain with subterranean elements. The AWG, formerly headquartered at Fort Meade, Maryland, had

training sites at Fort A. P. Hill, Virginia, and a robust mobile training team that travelled to hosting units, training multiple brigade combat teams in urban warfare. However, AWG was closed along with the Army's Red Team Academy out of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. To address the fears of the group's shuttering, the Army released a statement: "The functions of AWG, including the solutions to current and emerging threats, will transition to other Army organizations. Also, to ensure the utility of the organization's work over the past fourteen years is not lost, all lessons learned will be maintained by the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center (CAC), via the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL), Centers of Excellence (COEs), and other TRADOC enterprise stakeholders."<sup>27</sup> The Army also maintains an urban warfare study with the Modern Warfare Institute's Urban Warfare Project, and Fort Leavenworth's Army University Press hosts a Primer on Urban Operations section; each one continues the intellectual support to the Army's understanding of urban warfare, if one specifically seeks it out.<sup>28</sup>

Even with this intellectual support, the Army has shifted away from a deliberate urban training focus as it pivots more concertedly toward large-scale conventional combined arms fights. This shift has only been passionately heightened and embraced with the focus on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, though there are now some positive undercurrents of acknowledging the realities and a "relearning" of urban fighting.<sup>29</sup> The Army is not alone in shifting away from this. The U.S. Marine Corps had embraced the deliberate study and training for urban fighting before a reprioritization shifted focus. Out of its innovative Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory in Quantico, Virginia, in 2019, the Marines had a planned program called Project Metropolis II with a four-year life cycle as part of the Warfighting Lab's own urban focus.<sup>30</sup> However, as the Marine Corps shifted toward a littoral focus, it canceled the urban study project after only one year.<sup>31</sup> The first Project Metropolis was instituted during a three-year life cycle in the late 1990s under then Marine Corps commandant Gen. Charles Krulak to embrace urban operations. It had resulted in experimental equipment to include initial drone use, robotics, and communications, as well as changes in doctrine and tactics for urban operations

and training for marksmanship and sustainment. Many people ascribe these benefits from Project Metropolis I to the success of Marine urban operations in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom in places such as Ramadi and Fallujah.<sup>32</sup>

To bridge the gap from intellectual understanding and theory to practice, there have been calls in and out of the military profession for a more pointed embracing of the primacy of urban combat. These calls have included the creation of an urban warfare school and specialized professional military education.<sup>33</sup> It has also included some calls for specialized urban-focused units.<sup>34</sup> Even Congress became involved when the House of Representatives placed instructions for studies and reports by the Department of Defense on lessons learned from the urban operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Additionally, in the same National Defense Authorization Act of 2020, Congress proposed a specific urban training center.<sup>35</sup> In the last few years, Gen. Mark A. Milley, first as the Army chief of staff and most recently as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has made multiple public statements before and after the onset of the latest hostilities in Ukraine discussing the criticality of urban operations now and in the future of war.<sup>36</sup> Limited though important progress has been made, including the standing up of the Army's Urban Operations Planner Course.<sup>37</sup>

Even as there is give-and-take in the prioritization of understanding urban warfare through resilient intellectual commitment to its study, there is a wider gap in its practice. Current U.S. Army doctrine that does exist for urban fighting is largely rooted in the tactical fight: tactics, techniques, and procedures; battle drills; and small-unit skills.<sup>38</sup> While the urban fight is truly a decentralized small-level fight in execution, these squad-level block-by-block fights will not be conducted in a vacuum but in the growing expanse of dense urban terrain and rapid mass global urbanization. The joint Army/Marine Corps manual, *Urban Operations*, provides a foundation to build from but needs expansion and continued updating to current realities.<sup>39</sup> Ongoing revisions to the current doctrine are critically important and must make use of contemporary observations, informed by the study of the past and merged with developing theory for applied practice before the U.S. military finds itself in a sustained, high-intensity conflict inevitably involving dense urban

terrain. This calls for the expansion of operational level doctrine for large-scale urban operations. Fighting in a city has never been wished away by commanders and statesmen historically, and even now it is not the case. Sustained fighting in dense urban environments must be embraced doctrinally. Modern doctrine needs to be formulated, created, or updated, accounting for siege-like activities and large-scale sustained engagement across megacities and sprawling urbanization, and with incumbent cross interagency and partner coordination requirements and civil disturbance occurrences. There are studies and various lessons learned formats from the Center for Army Lessons Learned and the now shuttered Asymmetric Warfare Group that provide a foundation for this development; however, these documents, though providing framework, do not provide the authoritative guiding nature that official doctrine holds over the force and in professional military education and training.<sup>40</sup>

While battles are fought across varied terrain, the emphasis of this argument is that it is the fights in the cities over either the city itself, what the city contains, or what is in its immediate vicinity that it dominates that often determines the success of military operations. It is difficult to find a significant port, airfield, or rail hub in the middle of open, rural plains or an isolated coastline. These key infrastructures are often naturally surrounded, collocated, and have their access dominated by the inevitable urban environment they spawn over time. The future wars, as those often of the past, will be won in the cities, not always because of the cities themselves but because of what the cities possess. For this reason, the study, focus, resources, and training for urban planning and operations must be prioritized based on lessons from contemporary conflicts and history, with emphasis placed in developing military theory and expanding current doctrine to address the urban fight. ■

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