

**Understanding Urban Warfare. By John Spencer and Liam Collins.
Hampshire, England: Howgate Publishing Limited, 2022.**

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***Understanding Urban Warfare.* By John Spencer and Liam Collins. Hampshire, England: Howgate Publishing Limited, 2022. ISBN 978-1912440351. Maps. Photographs. Glossary. Notes. Sources cited. Index. Pp. vi, 392. \$29.95.**

Review by Amos C. Fox, Ph.D. Candidate, University of Reading

The bloody and destructive war in Ukraine, resulting from Russia's unprovoked invasion in February 2022, sparked renewed interest in urban warfare. To be sure, blistering battles outside of Kyiv, Kharkiv, and in cities like Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Mariupol brought attention to the long-overlooked aspect of urban warfare. Many militaries, to include the United States and Russia, possess doctrine built on the assumption that cities can be bypassed, or 'taken on the march.' Nevertheless, despite efforts to brush it aside, or demote its importance through institutional omission, urban warfare is one of the most prevalent and important facets of modern war. Local populations, densely packed civilian infrastructure, international humanitarian law considerations, and the ability to hide are just a few features that make urban environments challenging and make urban warfare one of the most complicated locations in which militaries can face one another or irregular fighters.

A niche topic for many years, John Spencer and his co-author, Liam Collins, relentlessly spent the better part of a decade chipping away at educating the defense studies community and militaries on the importance of urban warfare. Urban battles raged in many post-Cold War armed conflicts, like those within the 1990s Bosnian War, but those battles garnered little attention from militaries and politicians. One may assume that this inattention resulted from militaries and politicians who hoped that urban battles resulted from bad strategy, poor tactics, or destruction-obsessed combatants, and not a truism in warfare.

Nonetheless, Spencer and Collins wrote relentlessly, publishing a torrent of articles over the intervening years with the United States Military Academy's *Modern War Institute* (MWI), seeking to educate their audience on the perils and rigors of urban warfare. More recently, Spencer launched, and hosted, a podcast—the *Urban Warfare Project*—in which he

talked with experts from across the defense and security studies community on urban warfare and related tangential elements. This podcast, coupled with Spencer and Collins' previous publications on urban warfare, forms the backbone upon which their book, *Understanding Urban Warfare*, is built.

Summary

Understanding Urban Warfare is organized into three sections—*Understanding the Complex Operational Environment*, *Operational Case Studies*, and the *Conclusion*. In the book's opening section, Spencer, and Collins revisit several of the conversations from Spencer's podcast. In doing so, Spencer and Collins illustrate the nuance of cities and the impact that cities have on tactical combat operations.

The book's second section helps contextualize the first section with more theoretical musings through the use of real-world case studies. Further, the case study section relies on several first-person accounts from modern combat, to include conversations with individuals that participated in the Battle of Mogadishu, Operation Iraqi Freedom's (OIF) Battle of Fallujah, and OIF's Battle of Sadr City. The case studies provide detailed accounts of urban combat at the tactical level, in most cases, focusing on the insights and decisions of leaders and individuals at the battalion level and below. Each case study provides a riveting account of the challenges and dangers faced by individual soldiers and small units on the urban battlefield, providing useful tactical-level considerations for the practitioners of armed conflict.

In addition to first-person accounts, this section also contains supplementary case studies that provide further supporting evidence of the complexity of urban operating environments. Notable case studies include reflections from Operation Inherent Resolve's Battle of Mosul, The Philippines' Battle of Marawi, and the Battle of Shusha from the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Understanding Urban Warfare's conclusion provides a series of useful recommendations for policymakers and military leaders regarding urban warfare. Spencer and Collins' recommendations parallel the narrative from the book's opening two sections. The most powerful

recommendations Spencer and Collins offer are calling for the establishment of urban warfare centers, and an update to US Army urban warfare doctrine. These recommendations, according to Spencer and Collins, will help the US Army, and its partners, stay ahead of the challenges and traps of urban warfare by creating urban warfare experts that are thoroughly prepared to plan, lead, and operate on future urban battlefields.

Limitations

Despite all its goodness, *Understanding Urban Warfare* comes with a few limitations. First, the United States' post-9/11 wars in the Middle East dominate Spencer and Collins' analysis and reflections. To be sure, five of the book's nine case studies are from Iraq. This approach, largely focused on counterinsurgencies against non-state actors, does not account for the breadth of modern urban warfare. Russia's 2014-2015 Donbas campaign in eastern Ukraine, for example, provides a bevy of significant urban warfare examples. Battles at Luhansk Airport, Ilovaik, Donetsk Airport, and Debal'tseve all proved decisive to the campaign, each contributing to the two Minsk ceasefire agreements, but none of those battles are covered in any detail within the book. The benefits in expanding the discussion beyond non-state actors and also analyzing state actor-on-state actor urban combat is that it paints a slightly different picture than does a non-state actor/counterinsurgency focus. The battles from Ukraine in 2014-2015, for instance, provide clear foreshadowing of the brutal combat preference and techniques of Russia's army, which appeared to surprise onlookers during the early stages of Russia's February 2022 re-invasion of Ukraine.

Second, *Understanding Urban Warfare* is told predominately from the American perspective, and generally does not give a broader account of urban warfare. The book does not necessarily take the position of a non-US combatant, for example, and flesh out the purpose behind the benefits and limitations of operating in the urban space. Taking the position of ISIS in Mosul, the Russians in Ilovaik, or the Ukrainians at Donetsk Airport, and telling the story from their perspective could provide additional insights into understanding urban warfare that are missed by the American counterinsurgency perspective. By the same token, much of the language used to describe urban warfare is that of the US military, which

comes with its own shortcomings when analyzing and articulating events and tactics that are not found in US doctrine.

Third, *Understanding Urban Warfare* is heavily focused at the tactical level, with the storyteller rarely raising their head above the brigade-level. This focus is great for the tactical level practitioner and the student of warfare who is interested in the movement and actions of battalions, platoons, and individual soldiers. However, the book's excellent description of tactical action and tactical considerations limits its impact on the operational, strategic, and policy levels of war.

Recommendation

John Spencer and Liam Collins' *Understanding Urban Warfare* is an excellent addition to the emerging field of urban warfare studies. Spencer and Collins provide a useful handbook for practitioners looking to account for tactical battlefield considerations. The book provides rich accounts of tactical action and considerations for those attempting to navigate the perils of urban combat. Further, *Understanding Urban Warfare's* reliance on security studies experts allows Spencer and Collins to do a good job of explaining the nuanced challenges of operating on urban battlefields. In short, *Understanding Urban Warfare* is an excellent starting point for anyone looking to get their feet wet in the field of urban warfare studies or for those looking to expand their understanding of modern armed conflict. Considering the character of the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the dominant position that urban battles have played within that conflict, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike would benefit from picking up a copy of Spencer and Collins' *Understanding Urban Warfare*.