

People are the target: Urban destruction in the 21st century

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Abstract

Urban destruction in the 21st century has already turned out to be different from 20th century experience. Aerial bombardment, which destroyed so many cities in Europe and Asia during two world wars, was based on assumptions about how cities collapse, bringing down economies and regimes with them, and about the superiority of air power as the means of destruction. Both were flawed. In World War II, the destruction of cities was intended to shorten a conflict; in the 21st century, military tactics which concentrate the increased weight, firepower, and effectiveness of military units in urban battles on the ground actually prolong conflict. Evacuation and exile appear to be the main objective: depopulation lowers the human capital of countries and depresses their economies; moreover, the increased number of refugees can be turned into an instrument to exert leverage on other countries, destabilizing regions far removed from the war zone. Cities destroyed in world wars were rebuilt; cities destroyed in today's urban battles, often in fragile, unstable states, may be left in ruins for years, to be replaced by new cities with a change of population. Urban destruction in the 21st century raises questions about how to make cities safer, and about urban relocation and reconstruction.

Keywords

Refugees, resilience, revolution, Ukraine, urban destruction

Introduction: Urban destruction in the 20th and 21st centuries

When the Russia-Ukraine war started, some of us reached for a copy of Thucydides, who wrote of a war that lasted more than two decades, punctuated by the seasons which in winter impeded navigation and in spring demanded labor in the fields, reminding us of the importance of food and transport. At times, commanders had to decide between killing the

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occupants of a city, or destroying it. Thucydides reminded his reader, however, well-planned and executed a campaign, chance and fortune may determine the outcome. When the Russian drive to Kyiv to impose a change of regime and a possible restoration of Russian sovereignty was repulsed in March 2022, Russia's aggression took a different form: urban battles to control and destroy cities on the Black Sea and in the Donbas and Luhansk regions. There is, however, a method to what Russia is doing.

What is different about urban destruction in the 21st century? There is a clue: bomber fleets are not dropping bombs, supersonic missiles are not suddenly descending on cities before people have time to take shelter. Changes in the size and composition of armed forces are largely responsible for this change in tactics and strategy. Cities are exposed to destruction, not in minutes or hours but in weeks and months by ground forces with fierce artillery support, drones, and rockets. Urban battles as we know them now take weeks or months, a paradoxical phenomenon of deceleration in a world where information travels at the speed of light (King, 2021: 157). The battle of Mosul in 2016 lasted 9 months, that of Aleppo 4 years (2012–16), and of Donetsk airport, 9 months (2014–15) (King, 2021: 157).

The premises about the gains to be made by destroying cities have changed, too—perhaps a case of a strategy in search of a rationale. Depopulation seems to be the objective. The numbers of casualties are low, but of displaced persons and evacuees, very high, numbering in the millions. Precision and accuracy, to limit civilian casualties, become critical to the perceived legitimacy of military operations that extend over weeks, even months (King, 2021: 132). The effect on the economy is indirect as the labor force declines, and as the physical stock of housing and productive plant is destroyed. Depopulation of course removes civilians from a combat zone, but the departure of civilians, whether by premeditated evacuation or in an uncontrolled movement, has been an end in itself. For the first few months, Russia's invasion of Ukraine corresponded to urban battles in other countries. When it became evident in the autumn of 2022 that Ukraine could force Russian troops to retreat from their advance positions, thus restoring some recently annexed areas but also threatening Crimea, Russia, in a further effort to break morale and cripple the economy, directly targeted the country's capacity to produce and transmit electricity. Power systems were considered a major point of urban vulnerability in the 20th century, but the effects of their destruction on the war effort were inconclusive (the disruption of gas and oil supplies to other countries is also unlikely to prove decisive in political terms). In a historical lesson that bears attention when looking at Ukraine, Germany, and Japan proved to be sufficiently adaptive and resilient even when scores of cities were destroyed, leaving the Allies no alternative to a land invasion. This may be the only option Russia faces in the upcoming months.

20th century assumptions about urban destruction

By the birth of the air age, there was a growing awareness that large urban populations were a potential danger to security. Two lines of argument evolved in parallel. The first described the superiority of modern technology symbolized by the rapid evolution of aircraft design. The second described modern urban societies as helpless and lacking in

initiative. Unable to take initiative or care for themselves if the complex supply chains and infrastructures that made modern cities viable collapsed, people would panic; strikes and riots—favorite subjects in art and drama, political science and sociology—would interfere with the prosecution of war; revolutionary movements linking the working classes across borders would make mobilization impossible, and overturn governments.

There were hints during World War I of what was to come in the 1940s. Much of Louvain and Yprès in Belgium and Reims and Arras in France were destroyed in World War I. The Belgian cities because they were in the path of the German army, the French cities because they were literally on a static front line. Reims was bombarded by artillery at least once every day between 14 September 1914 and early June 1915; by the end of the war, 14,000 houses had been destroyed, 100,000 people evacuated. The main target was often the great Cathedral which Germans claimed was a French observation point for artillery (Gaetghens, 2018). These sieges transformed the image of Germany in Western propaganda from a respectable if difficult partner in the congress of great states to the barbaric enemy of Western civilization whose violations of international law and the rights of neutrals and civilians put it beyond the pale. Yet, in 1962, the Cathedral, symbol of what divided France and Germany, became the site of Franco-German reconciliation, the symbol of culture that transcends nationality.

As the war progressed, larger aircraft carried out sporadic bombing raids on Paris. People were so attracted to the sight of German airplanes flying over Paris that they sat on the boulevards and on the Butte Montmartre to get a better view! 27 bombs dropped from Zeppelins on 29 January 1916 left 26 dead in the city's popular eastern districts. The Gotha G bombers of 1917 provoked the French to conceive of a vast scheme to deceive German pilots who were obliged to fly at night to evade anti-aircraft batteries: the creation of an exact image of Paris to the city's northwest on largely unbuilt land. Pilots looking for landmarks to guide them would see the pattern of railroads, roads, buildings, canals and the Seine that they had memorized from maps, but all fake. One small part of this imitation Paris, complete with a decoy railroad station and tracks, was actually built to the city's east (Boissel, 2012). Had this simulacrum been carried out in full, the reconstruction of a fake Paris would have been the world's largest and most complete theme park.

Military thinkers and social scientists who lived through World War I, and like everyone else were determined to avoid a repetition of the stalemate on the battlefield that saw the numbers of dead and wounded grow into the millions as 1914 turned into 1918, believed that air power would change war. Already in the 1920s, it was known that a plane could destroy a naval vessel, signaling both an end to the era of battleships and the new age of aircraft carriers. The design of larger planes capable of flying greater distances at higher altitudes with a heavier load exposed cities far from the front to the full impact of total war. The bomber, it was believed, always gets through. Many, however, did not; in the United States' military and naval services in World War II, only the soldiers on the ground suffered more battle deaths than the airmen.

That cities could be a target was one thing; that they *should* be, another. The creation and expansion of modern infrastructures for ports, railroads, electricity generation, telecommunications, water and waste management since the 1890s underpinned the conceptual framework of assumptions about the vulnerability of cities. Infrastructures

were vulnerable not only to accidents and breakdowns in normal times, but to sabotage and bombardment in war. Already by 1930, a French officer, a Col. Vauthier, called for the protection of electricity networks (Konvitz, 1989; Vauthier, 1930). A blast underground near Fifth Avenue and 39th Street in Mid-Manhattan on 24 October 1935 which affected some 100,000 people, many trapped in subway trains, did not lead to panic, but it did show how dependent New York City was on electricity networks. Three years later, L. E. O. Charlton, writing on the air defense of Britain, put it dramatically: "If it had been done deliberately, we could not as a nation have produced a social pattern, and a set economy, more favourable for aggression from the air" (Charlton, 1938: 102). The next year Major Muir S. Fairchild gave a lecture at the US Air Corps Tactical School highlighting the vulnerability of America to collapse from aerial bombardment of 49 power plants in the Northeast (Fairchild, 1939).

Large power and water plants stood out in the cityscape, easy targets. Their destruction would be much more difficult than an industrial accident to make good. Without power or fresh water, daily life would stop, factories would shut down; without waste management systems, diseases would spread. Wrote Niles Carpenter in his book *The Sociology of City Life*, the city-dweller is helpless were "any vital function of the city fail for the briefest period" (Carpenter, 1931: 443). People in the highly individualistic society of the large, modern city, without roots in cohesive social communities and with little in common with one another, could neither cope nor improvise. Social scientists and commentators took a dim view of how resourceful people could be, warning governments against ignoring civilian morale at their peril. In the interwar years, fascism mobilized millions into mass movements; mass opinion polling took off in democratic states.

The second Thirty Years War (1914–45) transformed civilians into partisans and war workers on farms, in factories and hospitals, on railroads and ships. In a total war, the city is on the front line, the citizen, an active participant. German, British, and American analysts studied economic geography to pinpoint critical sites of production or transportation in the countries they wanted to defeat. American strategic bombing theory assumed that if key facilities could be destroyed while limiting civilian casualties, the disruption to daily life would be so extreme as to render a city uninhabitable; British area bombing, reflecting less sophisticated bombing equipment, favored indiscriminate destruction to induce panic and put pressure on a government to end the war. Typed and listed in categories, cities appeared to intelligence analysts as abstract units, dehumanized and devitalized, and therefore easier to destroy. Port cities, critical to the war effort, were a conspicuous target: large, full of combustible materials, heavily dependent on large unskilled workforces who live, typically, in densely packed districts, and easier for pilots to find at night (Konvitz, 1994). Some Anglo-American air raids that destroyed French and German port cities in 1942–43 (Lorient, La Rochelle, and Hamburg) were authorized in desperation simply because supreme commanders had no alternative than to attack the submarine bases and factories by air in an effort to diminish Allied shipping losses to German submarines. (Konvitz, 1992). In World War II, Allied intelligence services studied the effects of German air raids, concluding that economic activity recovered after less than a month. The great Hamburg raid in late July 1943 destroyed 56% of the city's

housing but the damage to Germany's capacity to continue the war and especially to prosecute its submarine warfare against Allied shipping was minimal.

The test of military and sociological theory about how cities function came with the war. Perhaps the first social science study of the indirect impact of war on civilian populations who were not exposed to battles was Prince's 1920 analysis of Halifax, Nova Scotia following the 1917 explosion of a munitions ship in its harbor, killing 1,700, and destroying thousands of houses. Had interwar theorists read it, they would have learned that essential services were quickly restored; there was no panic. Although in Britain's bombed cities people did not panic, the British assumed that subject to mass air raids, German civilians would behave differently; they did not. Analysts, however, always found reasons to explain why the results on an enemy's capacity to fight were less than expected (Konvitz, 1990). Evidence of how civilians in cities—British, French, Italian, Polish, and German alike—adapted, innovated, improvised, survived challenged pre-war assumptions. After 1945, psychologists, sociologists, and military strategists took an interest in how civilians coped with and recovered from air raids in World War II. In 1962, in his book *Air War and Emotional Stress: Psychological Studies of Bombing and Civilian Defense*, Irving L. Janis could still ask: "What are the dominant fears and psychological needs that are aroused by the threat of impending disaster? What specific factors [...] tend to augment emotional tension and what factors tend to diminish it?" (Konvitz, 1989: 840 and n. 66).

Air power to bring about the collapse of cities seemed an advance on naval blockades and besieging armies, provoking famine and disease among civilian populations (food as a weapon, after all, was effective in the Peloponnesian Wars). Naval blockades which interfered with freedom of navigation and food shipments were a major factor in the American decision to enter World War I, a conflict in which famine and the spread of epidemic diseases accounted for why the large number of civilian deaths exceeded deaths on the battlefield. In Warsaw in 1915-16, "everyday struggles [...] literally became a matter of life and death;" major food riots in June 1916 and May 1917 were silenced in the press following censorship to suppress "all articles about incidents, accidents, epidemics and poverty" (Blobsaum R, 2017: 16). In an ironic twist of history, the "greatest single 'man-made' disaster" in the 20th century was the Holodomor, the Ukraine famine of 1932-33 in which 7 million people, including 3 million children, died "due not to insufficient food but the ruthless demands of the Soviet state" intent on subjugating Ukraine (Hewitt, 1997: 133). The past is with us still: the threat of food shortages and even of famine has re-emerged as a consequence of the Russian blockade of Ukraine in 2022 through attacks on canals and railroads, and blockades. But ironically, it may not be Ukrainians who will suffer as much in 2022 as people in other countries where starvation is a threat. The Russian threat is to break the multi-year agrarian cycle in Ukraine of selling grain, planting, harvesting, storing and selling, and to interrupt chains of supply of fertilizer and other inputs used in Ukraine and in other countries. It could be a long struggle.

Until late in World War II, vastly enlarged infantry and armored columns, sweeping over territory—the terrestrial equivalent of large naval battles for command of the seas—avoided warfare in cities. The Battle of Stalingrad, famously recounted in Vassily

Grossman's and Jonathan Littell's epic novels, marked "the first time that mass industrial armies, fully equipped with modern weaponry of machine guns, tanks, artillery and air power, had been involved in a sustained battle against each other" on urban terrain (King, 2021: 29). The Battle of Stalingrad lasted some 3 months, fought by armies nearly as large as the population of the city itself!

Urban destruction in the 21st century

The huge contraction in the size of military establishments and the closure of many military bases since the end of the Cold War put an end to sweeping movements and battles on open ground of the kind that led to the defeat of one power by another as happened at the end of both world wars (King, 2021: 164). Gone the lane markers for military vehicles on the *autobahn* after 1991! Frontiers in the West (but not between Mexico and the United States) have been demilitarized; military bases, some in rural areas and others in cities, were converted into civilian use at a time when demand for office parks, housing, logistics centers and other spatially-intensive uses was growing; parade grounds became parks; army buildings were converted into university campuses, barracks into luxury apartments, and arsenals into exhibition halls. Until 2022 and the Russian attack on Ukraine, war on Europe's borderlands and killing fields east of the Rhine looked as improbable as in 1914 or 1939. Nevertheless "place annihilation," in geographer Kenneth Hewitt's phrase, remains an objective of war (Hewitt, 1997: 133).

Even before war returned to Europe in the form of urban battles, post-modernist criticism of the contemporary city gave a new twist to old assumptions about the vulnerability of cities, assumptions which have persisted in the face of contrary evidence of their resilience after industrial accidents and natural catastrophes. The end of the Cold War coincided with the beginning of a new era of globalized urbanization in most countries which made New York, London, Paris, Madrid, and Mumbai (among others) into terrorist targets. Belief in the 1990s that large western cities were breeding an urban underclass revived the nemesis of the large city which generates its own breakdown. The 20th century assumption of the city as a "unified, integrated, functionally interdependent entity" that would collapse if its core infrastructures were destroyed has been replaced by the image of the global city as inherently unstable, "rarely, if ever, in equilibrium," a place where different groups are always competing (King, 2021: 78). Covid also highlighted the extent to which significant socio-environmental disparities structure daily life for millions in many cities, and Covid lockdowns, whatever their rationale to curb the spread of the virus, have reinforced for many the sense that the city is at the very least unhealthy, and at the worst, unable to cope with emergencies: the sight of people waiting for hours to be treated outside hospitals will not soon be forgotten.

Rankings of competitive global cities highlighted density, specialization and complexity, or their positive externalities, as assets that explain productivity. These, however, have costs which disproportionately affect younger and low-income workers. The stresses of life in very large cities—and especially transport congestion, access to jobs, and affordable housing—have led to urban riots in cities as different as Cairo and Tel Aviv, London and Paris, Santiago de Chile and Hong Kong.

Paradoxically, the end of the Cold War and the eclipse of Marxism has not put the risk of urban revolution behind us; on the contrary. During the first half of the 20th century, there were 2.44 new revolutionary episodes per year, 2.80 during the Cold War, and 4.10 since 1990. “Of the new revolutionary episodes that occurred from 2015 to 2019, 89% took place primarily in cities (a proportion greater than at any five-year period since 1900), and 63% were urban civic in character—unarmed, relying on the power of numbers, and broadly civic in demands” (Beissinger, 2002: 426). Ten years after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2003–04), the Euromaidan protest of 21 November 2013 grew from 50,000 to 800,000 after fifty were injured in a brutal repression; nearly 200 protesters were shot on 20 February 2014.

There is evidence that governments have been accumulating experience at crowd control and panic suppression. With smaller military forces, states no longer have “the personnel to deploy one member of the security forces for every fifty citizens” as they did when driving insurgents from cities in the 1950s–70s in Nairobi, Algiers, Aden, and Belfast (King, 2021: 64). Uprisings have occurred in more than half the world’s states since 2008 and the global financial crisis (and Arab Spring). Yet, the percentage of successful uprisings, however, has declined, even as the number of episodes has increased. Better able to mobilize very large crowds, demonstrators exploit “strategic spaces between buildings to challenge incumbent regimes” (Beissinger, 2002: 133). Fear of domestic violence has the same effect as the claim that a foreign power is about to invade, to justify the pre-emptive use of force by the government in power. Concerned lest violence against unarmed crowds will only further mobilize people (especially when the numbers of police or soldiers in a city may not be sufficient and the loyalty of the force itself may be doubtful), governments have learned better how to repress civic oppositions and dominate uprisings by controlling space and increasing the means of surveillance. More secure, autocratic, and corrupt regimes lose any incentive to reform. It is no longer plausible to believe, as it had been in the 1990s that urban uprisings inspired by 19th century political and civic agendas would topple autocratic regimes and accelerate a transition to democracy.

Urban battles make better use of the concentration of fire power and huge supplies of weapons by smaller forces, the result of a severe contraction in the size of military forces (King, 2021: 27). The assault on Mosul in 2016, a city of 1.7 million, was managed by at most 100,000 troops (*The Economist*, 2022: 47). Warfare is no longer based on speed and movement. Ground operations have become multi-dimensional, calling for exceptional preparations which have made evident American technological superiority and the weaknesses of Russian anti-air defences. As *The Economist* put it as a leader for a three-page article on urban warfare, “Western armies are re-learning how to fight in cities” (*Economist*, 2022). With micro-sieges, “a war of position has replaced a war of movement” by infantry and armored columns (King, 2021: 203). The result is “a grinding war of attrition” (King, 2021: 157). Close contact with civilians means that warfare in cities “is the closest the West comes to pre-industrial forms of conflict” (Hills, 2004: 236–37).

Control of space is key in both civil (or intra-state) and interstate conflicts, a point emphasized by Anthony King who subjects both kinds of conflicts to a single analytical

framework focusing on “targets in the city” in a “self-reinforcing cycle” of more intense fighting in “ever contracting areas,” rather than on the city itself. In war as in peace, governments do not necessarily fear very large cities, only the problems of fighting in them (King, 2021: 39–40; 141). Poly-centric, modular, cohesive, and dispersed military groups, or swarms, operated independently and freely in small, flexible urban units, but these are more likely to be “cut off and defeated in detail” (King, 2021: 144–45; 161). Fighting inside buildings is difficult among multiple rooms and constraining corridors with the added risk of shooting at your own side. The city—walls, buildings, tunnels—can be an ally to both defenders and attackers, who need to master details about its structures that strategists in world wars could ignore. Urban fighting, which demands practice and discipline, is the opposite of a street riot with its improvisational and desperate character. In the face of a determined and entrenched defense, the only advance possible “without suffering heavy casualties has been to grind through cities, building by building [...] long, slow boring” (King, 2021: 162). Close-quarters battle (CQB) has been more commonly effective in the West Bank and Gaza, India, the Philippines, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Urban destruction follows from an analytical exercise that disaggregates a city into component parts, including the spatial dimension (mapping is key), which can be isolated in ways that allow superior force to be applied (King, 2021: 125–290).

The Middle East is the place to go to see, in Eyal Weizman’s phrase, “the future of postmodern urban warfare” (quoted by King, 2021: 144). Israel, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan have provided the material where military tactics and doctrines have been tested, discarded, revised, improvised, improved. Walls and tunnels within cities of the kind not seen since Berlin, 1961, reveal the bizarre division between Israeli and Palestinian territories: Israel’s 1949 “Green Line” boundary which once was the basis for a possible peace with Palestine is 305 km long, but the barriers between Israel and the Palestinians exceed 1000 km (Weizmann, 2004: 187). These “different paths of partition,” Eyal Weizmann concluded, do not form a permanent solution unless the entire “resources of the state are constantly drafted to maintain and service its length” (Weizmann, 2004: 191). It is worth keeping in mind that economic calculations do not enter into the calculus of decision-makers when considering a cease-fire between Ukraine and Russia, or the return of Crimea to Ukraine. Neither Russia nor Ukraine has an interest in a solution based on limited gains for the one, and limited losses for the other. The issue of a cease-fire in Ukraine that would leave Donbas and Crimea under Russian control reminds us that a question the Greeks faced has never gone away: at what point does compromise, even on points of right, become expedient?

Why destroy cities? Population displacement and the future shape of cities

Air raids in World War II killed tens of thousands in hours or days, but that was a total war in which Germany and Britain could and did retaliate. In today’s asymmetric conflicts (as of September 2022, Ukraine will not attack Russia), large numbers of civilian deaths would lead to such pressure on the aggressor as to make its further prosecution of the conflict untenable. Public opinion, however, gets used to low numbers of deaths spread

over a long period. Thus, military operations that focus on targets in cities—without trying to destroy a city in one or two massive operations—can be sustained, especially when the risk of retaliation is so low.

If urban destruction consumes so much time and munitions, why do it? Is population displacement an unintended by-product of urban destruction in the 21st century, or as I am inclined to believe, the intended outcome? “Forced dispersion facilitates political dominance,” wrote Dr. Annie Sparrow, who pointed out that the Russian destruction of hospitals in Ukraine “underscores that displacement is a primary objective rather than an unfortunate outcome.” (Sparrow, *Financial Times*, 2022).

Urban depopulation, not as people die but as they leave, has become common in war today, while remaining exceptional in peace. Detroit’s 1.89 million inhabitants in 1950 has become 639,000 in 2020, perhaps the most dramatic example of irreversible urban depopulation in a developed country at peace. The redistribution of the metropolitan region’s 3.9 million people in 1970 to 3.5 million in 2020 only shows that the loss of the urban core has not been made good at the regional scale. No doubt comparative studies are needed to distinguish among causative factors that are place-based such as race riots and poor governance in Detroit, and more general trends such as economic recessions, the collapse of technology-dependent economies, or border changes. When do changes of degree become qualitative? On the answer depend policy interventions for investment, planning, subsidies, and more.

Evacuation from cities in war in the 20th century, whether from London in advance of air raids, Paris in June 1940, or from cities where housing was reduced to rubble, was for most people, temporary. Because reconstruction began during the war, at least in terms of planning, if not actual rehousing, people anticipated returning. Most cities destroyed in World War II in Japan, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom were not only rebuilt, but recovered demographically (Berlin, with a population 25% smaller, is an exception). The destruction-reconstruction sequence, which was compressed in time during both World Wars, has been broken in the 21st century, and not only because urban battles last a long time. In echoes of the Roman destruction of Carthage, Damascus may neither want nor be able to afford to rebuild Aleppo, its traditional rival, where 6 years will be needed to clear 15 million tons of debris. If there is no intent to rebuild, the loss of population will be permanent.

Many displaced from urban battles since 1945 have become refugees, whose numbers add up when the flow of refugees, year after year, making a lie to the claim that many will return to their country of origin. Of the more than 30 armed conflicts underway at the end of the 1980s, 24 had lasted more than a decade—again, the time factor—and perhaps more important, killing more than 5.5 million civilians and displacing more than 25 million people (Hewitt, 1997: 112). Forced marches, exile, captivity, diasporas—history recounts so many episodes of Biblical proportions. When treating refugees from war as a humanitarian disaster, which it is, we lose sight of the fact that there are so many more refugees in the world than 20 or even 60 years ago, and fall back on facile, bureaucratically convenient, legalistic distinctions between civilian and military responsibilities, distinctions that mattered more in World Wars I and II than today, when the resettlement of so many millions in their country of origin is out of the question. The

immediate post-1945 years saw the flight of Jews in Arab countries to Israel and of Palestinians to refugee camps, but the numbers were small compared to those in Viet Nam, where uprooting and displacement “in the context of enforced urbanisation and de-urbanisation” amounted to some 12,512,500 people, or between 68% and 75% of population based on estimates of the population of South Vietnam in 1970 of between 18 and 20 million, versus 247,000 estimated dead, 900,000 injured (Hewitt, 1997: 292).

Today some 500,000,000 people live in a country where they were not born. Of these, some 80 million may be refugees, equivalent to the population of Germany, or more than that of Poland and Canada combined. Ten million persons have been displaced in Syria; those living in extreme poverty were twice as numerous in 2019 as in 2011. There are 3.8 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. Refugees in Syria, Libya, Georgia, and East Africa are exploited by organized crime, to be sure, but also by Russia: airlifted to Belarus, the intention is to destabilize other countries, creating geo-political tensions and magnifying the threat of uncontrolled flows from the Middle East, Africa, and Central America, Russia’s foreign policy objectives are well served by inflaming partisan support for anti-immigrant populist-nationalist movements in countries as different as the United States, France, Hungary, Italy, and Sweden where racial and religious arguments are used to deflect evidence that refugees (like other immigrants) contribute to growth. The Great Replacement Theory diffused by far-right demagogues holds that liberal governments deliberately seek to change the socio-cultural profile of their countries by promoting immigration to make society more diverse. But by a perverse twist, authoritarian regimes can adopt a Great Replacement strategy of their own, reducing the presence of certain racial, religious, and ethnic groups in their societies thereby making them more homogenous and servile, thus reinforcing the state. During and after World War I, population transfers (Greeks from Turkey in 1922, for example) were part of the process of redrawing borders so as to create more ethnically rooted nation-states in a deliberate effort to create more stable and peaceful conditions that also left a poisoned legacy of minority rights and grievances, irredentism, and national claims stored up for the future as witnessed by the changing demographic composition of places like Vilnius (Lithuania) which belonged to different states between the 1890s and 1990s. The process continues on the eastern and southern borders of Turkey.

The population of Ukraine was already declining since 1990; before the war, its population numbered some 43 million, 70% urban. By 24 March 2022, more than half the children in Ukraine had left their homes, a quarter, the country. In addition to the 6.5 million displaced Ukrainians internally, 8 million refugees or displaced persons have left the country, 3 million to Russia (thus boosting Russia’s population figures which otherwise would show a decline) 1.5 million to Poland, 1 million to Germany, and so on. By the time the war in Ukraine is over, many who left will have made new lives in other places. Millions of Ukrainians have been welcomed in the European Union without so far provoking economic and social problems in host countries, proof that western societies are more resilient and adaptable than the far-right opponents of immigration allege.

What happens to regions and cities after hostilities end, when rebuilding is possible? In addition to exiles returning to Ukraine, other people from Europe and elsewhere with a different ethnic (regional or religious) identity, and with different levels of education, may

settle. A post-war Ukraine could be more cosmopolitan and European, a post-war Russia less so. If loyalty matters most, the hundreds of thousands of Russians leaving Russia since March 2022—thousands on one of over 50 flights a day between Moscow and Istanbul at the end of September after the call-up of reservists—will not be missed by a repressive regime; many may intend to return one day, of course, but do not control the circumstances that would permit them to do so. If Russia holds on to the regions in Ukraine that it occupies, it can be expected to build new cities near but not on the site of the cities that have been destroyed, and to be populated by people who did not live there before, a form of colonization long practiced by regimes in central and eastern Europe.

Russia's initial invasion, to conquer and annex Ukraine, assumed that the country's economic assets, its land and above all its 43 million people, would make Russia richer and more powerful. Once victory became impossible, Russia sought to destroy Ukraine's independence, first through depopulation, thus breaking the connection between people and place and culture, and then through the destruction of social cohesion and the means of production in an economy dominated in the past by oligarchs in control of large Soviet-era factories dependent on Russian gas and by low value-added, resource-based exports. This modern version of a scorched earth strategy assumes a correlation between demographic numbers and GDP, more similar to the Ukraine of the 19th century, but often belied by small independent countries with a high defense profile, large numbers of immigrants or foreigners, and high value-added exports in the service sector such as Switzerland and Israel. Perhaps the best counter-example that Russia should consider is Korea after 1954, divided and largely in ruins, which within two generations became the 11th wealthiest country in the world. But there is still a fortified border between the two Koreas, a cease-fire but not peace.

Questions for the future of us all

In a highly urbanized world with some 10,000 cities, there are plenty to destroy. Cities figure significantly in the study of war, first as the place where material is produced, troops assembled and orders given, then to be attacked or defended, but also as a social body that can be betrayed by traitors or informers, and a place where peace is negotiated and treaties signed (Adamson, 2015). Rebuilt, cities are symbols of renewal rising from the rubble of destruction, recognized like Le Havre as world heritage sites. Definitive, exhaustive assessments of the socio-demographic and economic consequences of early 21st century urban battles, more likely to enter the curriculum of war colleges than of departments of urban and regional science, will take another decade. This article concludes with questions which link the recent past to the near-term future, and connect research to policy. As always, there are lessons to be learned about how civilians protect themselves with implications for cities everywhere exposed to sudden shocks and the effects of climate change (Glaeser, 2022).

How can cities be made safer? Security measures are usually reactive, for example, through regulations that change and raise standards. Following IRA bombings in London and terrorist attacks in New York after 1993, anti-terrorist measures became more pervasive, lifting security to an unquestioned value, exempt from normal cost-benefit

analysis. The growth of the security economy is, by definition, almost impossible to calculate with any degree of accuracy but the costs borne by the private sector—including the relocation of critical back-office operations to more remote suburban locations—may well be twice public expenditure (Marcuse, 2004: 265–66). Barricades and citadels have already transformed many an urban district into enclaves, privatizing space, and expanding surveillance. Terrorism led to analyses of the vulnerability of water and power systems to attack, a return to 20th century assumptions of strategic air war about how to cripple urban economies and societies; Covid-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine has had similar effects concerning global supply chains and power systems. There is always more emphasis on hard than on soft infrastructures, leading to under-investment in human and social capital—public goods—so essential for resilience. “Widespread absence of strong commitments to improving public safety measures,” explained geographer Kenneth Hewitt 25 years ago, has been the major reason why urban disasters of all kinds have become more costly and fearsome (Hewitt, 1997: 279). Without a paradigm shift of priorities, there is no reason to be hopeful (Konvitz, 2016, 2020).

Are megacities safer? We don’t know. Writing in 2015, William Adamson, argued that downsizing, the American military should be wary of combat in megacities, and questioned whether attacks on them would advance American strategic objectives (Adamson, 2015). Too big to be besieged or invaded, they may only be vulnerable to nuclear bombs or cyber-attacks. The largest number of megacities in the future will be in Asia, Latin America, and especially Africa. There is no place to hide: Tel Aviv does not qualify by size to be ranked a megacity, but it lies in an arc grounded in Cairo and Istanbul, megacities by any definition. In recent years, urban battles have been fought in medium-size cities, and against regimes or states that have been unable to retaliate, and none in megacities, those with 10 million or more people, nor in countries directly aligned with the United States. The United States has pledged to defend countries which include the megacities of Seoul, Tokyo, Osaka, the Ruhr, Paris, and London, as well as the New York-Washington megalopolis and Los Angeles.

Should evacuation to take people out of harm’s way, whether from a city under siege, or from a city exposed to earthquakes, fires, floods, or storms, be channeled by government, or left to people to decide for themselves? The question, which is critical to understanding the impact of crises on individuals and on social structures, is all the more relevant now that climate-change catastrophes may render densely populated areas uninhabitable for days or weeks, or permanently, a risk some have been exposed to for a long time from earthquakes. During the Cold War, in the United States, the interstate highway system was intended to function as evacuation routes, as it still does when there are tropical storm warnings (Farish, 2004). Those fleeing natural disasters expect to return to the places they left and face a long period of economic adjustment, health problems, and physical reconstruction, but a nuclear attack would make reconstruction impossible in the short term and destroy all the visible landmarks and social networks that enable people to cope. Evacuation in advance of a natural disaster—or war—involves a dilemma: if declared too early so that the physical movement of thousands could proceed smoothly, disruption lasts longer; if the warning comes with less time and more immediate danger, the evacuation is more chaotic (Ziegler, 1985: 158–161). If urban evacuees are directed to

rural areas at lower density (which in war are less likely to be devastated by nuclear bombs), the local population, suddenly swollen by many thousands, could well be overwhelmed, a warm welcome turning into fatigue and friction in a few days or months. Regional redistribution, however, is ongoing wherever labor and housing markets work efficiently. People's preferences in recent years about where they want to live and work take the form of voluntary evacuation from declining to growing regions, more often coastal and warmer; many coastal regions now exposed to devastation are more heavily populated than ever before. Since 2020 and Covid, moreover, cities are seen by some as at best unattractive, and at worst as dangerous. A more dispersed urban geography at lower density will, however, do nothing to reduce inequality, but could well weaken the agglomeration effects that in the past have made cities, and especially large ones, remarkably productive.

What is the future of large-scale planning and resettlement? In World War II, urban reconstruction began almost immediately once attacks—which lasted only hours or a few days—ceased; when cities are exposed to destruction over months, the classic cycle of destruction-rebuilding is broken. Reconstruction concerns of course not only those cities destroyed in war, but also cities destroyed in industrial explosions, fires, earthquakes, floods, and tropical storms whose number and intensity are increasing. In the United States, the United Kingdom, Mediterranean, and Northern Europe, entire areas of urban settlement may have to be relocated, a retreat from the coast on a scale not seen since the end of the Roman Empire. We are not prepared for this. In the 20th century when urban reconstruction accompanied massive rural-to-urban migration, existing cities had to be rebuilt to accommodate more people, and new ones planned. The planning and regulatory regimes then were more flexible. Given current constraints on large-scale changes in land use and on the construction of new infrastructure for energy, transport and water systems, it is difficult to see how new cities can be planned as they had been in the post-1945 era. Since the 18th century, utopian ideas, underpinned by the belief that the future can be better than the past, have inspired urban reconstruction and the planning of new cities. In the interwar years, fascists and liberals did not share the same vision of the city of the future, but both projected one. Today, at least judging by the media, apocalyptic scenarios of urban dystopia appeal to the public more than utopian projections. Missing in our day is a vision of the city of, say, 2040 which can mobilize both moral and material resources. The effort to re-design cities lags behind the imposition of rules to reduce carbon emissions, setting up a new version of the old conflict between winners and losers.

Questions about cities and urbanization connect the social sciences and humanities to outstanding issues about war and peace, stability, and cohesion. Cities are among the most complex phenomena to analyze. The tools used are often crude, in part reflecting the kinds of models used for analysis, and limited by the quality and depth of statistical data. In macro-economics, cities are a kind of black box: what happens inside cannot be observed but the results can be measured, usually at national level. A few famous cities—almost always the same—populate studies of urban history but urbanization is a mass phenomenon involving many thousands of cities. Generalizations about cities which sidestep sticky differences shaped by history, politics, commerce, and religion instead favor technological or economic determinism, or in other words impersonal factors, giving the

impression that cities and the people in them are unable to control or influence their environment. And impotence is precisely what people in cities being destroyed feel. Generalizations are nonetheless needed about why cities grow and how the large numbers of people in them cohere—or in other words, why cities do not disintegrate on their own. The question is as relevant to Warsaw, absorbing hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians, as to Houston and New Orleans recovering from floods and hurricanes, or to Lvov and Kharkiv. Without the human dimension, we do not know why people want to live in or fight over cities, how they use and appropriate space, how they cope with fear and grief and rebuild communities, what memories they take with them when fleeing, or what they want to rebuild.

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