# The spectre of urban warfare is haunting Europe.

Inaugural address. 20 minutes. Boris Kashnikov

**Introduction.**

The American civil war general William T. Sherman famously described war as Hell. War is indeed irredeemably cruel. When he ordered the city of Atlanta to be burned to the ground, he was certain that he had no other option. Humanitarian niceties - although such terminology did not exist at the time - could prove dear. War remains Hell, not only because we believe it is a Hell, but also because even though all sides know this, we still fight wars in the most cruel way. This is how it works in game theory, which is at the heart of strategic thinking. Fortunately, Ethics gives us the tools to do more than blindly follow a predestined series of events, by allowing us to change for the better our collective, deeply entrenched values and prejudices. In the same vein, Ethics is capable of transforming war into something better than Hell. War is indeed cruelty, but we can refine it. It is true, morals is a double-edged sword. It can at times make war even worse than Hell. As you all know, ethics does not guarantee simple solutions. What we need now is radical ethical thinking, because urban warfare is re-emerging as one – if not the - predominant form of war. Now is the time to check our moral compass and to place moral and legal boundaries around what is acceptable before the general Hell of war turns into Inferno of Urban Warfare. I prefer the term Inferno, rather than Hell, when it comes to urban warfare. “Inferno in Chechnya” – that was the title of the book by Brian Glyn Williams on war in this republic, a title which accurately captures the all-encompassing horror of being helplessly trapped inside a raging cauldron of urban war. Urban warfare is one of the most vicious and destructive forms of war. It is also true that urban warfare is one of the most archaic forms of warfare, and it catapults us back to the times when the key instruments of war were the mace and the axe. There only significant difference between the urban wars of history lies in the nature of the weaponry used. The fear, hunger and terror are essentially the same. We may debate issues of fact in urban warfare. But the heart of the matter does not lie in empirical facts and data. Rational people will generally agree on the facts of the matter and even about possible theoretical interpretations of the facts. Empirical science may be employed to collect, and classify facts related to contemporary urban war. A scientific theory might be used to explain the facts. However, facts do not tell the whole story. Human beings are a special breed of living creatures, capable of not only fixing and explaining the facts, but also of normative evaluations. They are also capable of changing the course of events and patterns of behaviour by changing their values and collective conduct.

**What has to be done.**

Blind, mindless fate is not supposed to drive European nations to war. Ned Lebow (Kings College, London) in his seminal “Why Nations Fight” enumerates several basic motives which trigger war: interest, honour, standing and security. More often than not, wars are triggered by an even less glamourous set of emotions: greed, vicious spite, hatred and fear. Evidently, human nature is a blend of the base and the sublime. In the words of David Hume: “Some particle of the dove, kneaded into our frame, along with the elements of the wolf and serpent”. At EuroISME we do not aspire to change human nature for the better to any substantial extent, even less to eliminate wars and beat swords into ploughshares. Nations might have legitimate reasons to wage wars. The only problem is that the reasoning which leads to war often proves unreasonable and decision making is triggered by base motives, The rise of urban warfare in recent decades poses a new tangible challenge to our shared ethical values and we must find an ethical response.

**The problematic of urban warfare at our previous conferences and in the current research and practice**

The spectre of urban warfare has haunted Europe since the end of the Second World War. (Srebrenica, Sarajevo, Belgrade, Grozny, Donetsk, and who knows where will be next.). It is not that we have ignored urban warfare at EuroISME and elsewhere. At our previous conferences, even beginning with the inaugural conference in Paris 2011, the problem of urban warfare loomed large. All nine of our previous conferences engaged with the problematic of urban war to some extent. Now it is high time to put the problem of urban warfare centre stage. We at EuroISME are not alone in addressing the ethical problems of urban warfare. Let me mention some of the most important institutions, such as the Urban Warfare Studies Centre at West Point chaired by John Spencer. I must also mention the efforts of the Oxford Institute for Ethics Law and Armed Conflict, represented by the works of Hugo Slim, who is speaking at this conference. Substantial efforts are coordinated by Peace Research Institute, Oslo. Of course, the legal aspects of urban warfare are the primary focus for the researchers and practitioners at the ICRC. The list is by no means complete and I beg pardon of those whom I did not shortlist.

**What ethics can do.**

The problematic of ethics of urban warfare lies in the middle ground between the scholarship of ethics and the scholarship of war. We have hundreds of publications related to the problematic of fighting in an urban warfare environment under the auspice of military study, strategic research and military tactics. They all occasionally raise moral issues. In the sphere of ethics, especially the ethics of war and peace, war in the city is often regarded as an example of the most vicious and persistent violence. The urgent nature and importance of the problem necessitates some kind of cross-pollination. We urgently need specific and systematically applied ethical research directly dedicated to the study of ethical aspects of urban warfare. We equally need military study endowed with ethical analysis. To be frank, assisting in this cross-pollination is one of the objectives of this conference.

**The transformation of war**

What is happening now under the heading of Urban Warfare should be regarded as another new chapter of the constant transformation of war. Carl Clausewitz famously compared war to a chameleon, due to its volatile nature and unlimited ability to change. At the same time, there are certain aspects of war, which constitute the unchanging core. However, there are some aspects of war, which tend to fade away at times and then make a return. War in the City is one of these eternally recurrent features of warfare. It is simultaneously the most ancient and the most contemporary form of warfare. Probably all the possible aspects of the current transformation of war have a direct link with urban warfare. Among the current trends of the changing character of war, I would mention the following trends:

*Localization of war*. War does not occur on the broad and massive, even continental, scale as we used to know it during the two World Wars of the 20th century. War, like politics, is increasing local in nature. More often than not, it is a civil war, or a war of secession, or a fight against terrorism, or even prompted by humanitarian intervention.

*Privatization of war*. We are witnessing the return of privateers to war. Instead of individual contractors, private military companies are often willing to do the job. War in the city is not for ordinary conscripts and even for the professional army it is often too dangerous.

*Terrorization of war,* if I am allowed to use this neologism*.* Contemporary war is progressively becoming a terror war. Both the terrorists and those who are waging war on terrorism are often employing the means of terror. Some researchers suggest that cities have assumed a central importance for terror networks and became targets of terrorist attacks as well as attacks on terrorists.

*Criminalization of war*. War was always hand in glove with crime. Even if the war itself is not waged for outright criminal purpose, it always attracts criminals. War in the city is ripe with criminal activity and we have witnessed it everywhere. The black market thrives in a war torn city and this black market as well as criminality in more general terms is an inevitable factor in urban warfare. We also need to include here consideration of what are effectively private militaries funded by mega criminals such as drug cartel leaderships.

*Robotization of war*. Autonomous weapons are coming to substitute man, triggering a myriad of moral problems. But these problems are nowhere as acute as in urban terrain, simply because of the close proximity of the target and innocent civilians (if they do not constitute the direct target) and the possibility of tragic mistakes.

*Cyberizaton of war.* It is cyber war, which is destined to reign supreme in the near future. Again, due to its very nature cyber warfare is predominantly focused on urban centers and it is in the context of urban warfare, that it becomes most efficient.

*Asymmetrization* of warfare. Warfare is increasingly characterized by asymmetry. This asymmetry is typically realized by attacks on key points, such as cities

*Hybridization of war*. Contemporary war tends to merge with some other forms of violence and with some other forms of violence short of war. Contemporary war is often hardly distinctive from terrorism and it has less of a kinetic quality. Sometimes we do not even know, if we are fighting or not. Drawing the line between war and peace is a difficult and moving target. To go back to Clausewitz’s chameleon analogy, we now have to deal with 2 chameleons, how we fight wars and even more perplexingly, what in fact constitutes war.

**On the nature of Urban warfare**

The urbanization of war constitutes the very core of all possible transformations of the character of war. All the factors which are changing the character of warfare seem to coalesce around urban warfare. Some military strategists consider urban militarism as the predominant form of new wars. However, by way of a paradox, cities were often the focus of war for most of history, playing a central role in the earliest campaigns. The first battle in history of which there is any historical record was between the Hittites and the Egyptians in 1224 BC. The battle was fought outside the city of Kadesh, an important transportation hub. The very terms “militarization” and “urbanisation” have developed hand in hand throughout history. Historically, urban areas were the centers of gravity of military operations. Besides, a city constitutes a symbol of political and moral power, a communication and transportation hub, an economic stronghold, and (nowadays) a mass media center. If I am allowed to paraphrase the famous words of Charles Tilly, I would say: *war makes cities, cities make war*. The war on and in the city became a major and tragic trend for human civilization. Urban areas make critical strategic objectives and urban operations fulfill four critical agendas: City is naturally a major target of attack. The increased concentration of infrastructures turns the city into a military target because it hosts the technical systems. Historically, the central targets were populations as well as logistics, with the aim being to demoralize the enemy and cut their supply routes.The capture of cities makes a strategic and symbolic condition of victory. Simultaneously, urban centers make natural habitats for guerrilla warfare and terrorist attacks. Cities provide the most trying and difficult terrain for attackers*.* A city may often become a trap or even a tombstone for military power, as it happened to the French army in Moscow and the Russian army in Grozny in 1995. In both cases, the capture of the city became little more than a Pyrrhic victory.

**Siege warfare as the predecessor of contemporary urban warfare.**

The historical record of the urban battlefield is rather diverse. Perversely, the increasing prominence of urban war catapults us back to Middle Ages. For all its technological sophistication, contemporary urban warfare is a descendant of siege warfare, which reigned supreme in the middle ages and was - however odd this might seem to us now - strictly regulated by the canon law of the Catholic church. War itself was predominantly a series of sieges. The capture of the city marked the end of the siege and frequently the end of war itself. It is not so nowadays. The taking of a city is only the first and arguably less important stage of the urban war. The task of capturing the city shifts to the challenge of pacifying insurgencies and establishing peace. Civilian casualties in sieges could be extraordinarily high due to starvation and contagious diseases, and they increase in the immediate aftermath. The capture of a city often change the course of history. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 did change the course of history. The invention of artillery was a game changer for unban war. It was so effective that it resulted in changes in the very design of cities. The formal siege methodology was developed by Sebastien Le Prestre de Vauban, the chief engineer for Lous X1V. Later, through the 19th century the confluence of technology made urban combat and sieges less common. Beginning at the end of the 17th century, many cities began to change their design and the fortress eventually disappeared. Battles in the city lost their specificity and were regarded as a close relative to war in some other complex terrain like mountains or forests. This made siege warfare almost irrelevant. The horrendous siege of Leningrad is probably the last echo of the age of sieges. During the first and the second world wars smaller towns, were often simply obliterated by artillery bombardment. Soon after the Second World War warfare has returned to the urban battle space, but it was not a siege, but a completely different warfare. Often these were police operations on a grand scale rather than an outright war, sometimes a blend of the two. Of this nature were the French wars in Algeria, Soviet suppression of insurrections in Prague and Budapest and British police operation in Belfast. To some extent, trying to solve the problem of urban warfare is a homage we pay to humanitarian concerns. Modern armies more or less earnestly try to be more proportionate and discriminative in their application of violence in the heavily populated areas and they focus on the avoidance of collateral damage. However, modern armies have also encountered enemies that have not been armies in the traditional sense but rather urban insurgents or terrorists.

**Contemporary urban warfare**

Due to almost all the major trends of the groundbreaking transformation of war, future conflicts will largely occur in cities. Urban space is progressively becoming transformed into a space of war and this battlespace will quite probably dominate warfare. The contexts of military terrain of course are different in different urban contexts. They are different in Grozny, Aleppo, Srebrenica, Donetsck or Gaza strip. Nevertheless, there are some general trends. Let me give some of the most typical implications of contemporary urban warfare.

1. First of all, it is a direct attack on civilian population or the devastation of the infrastructure with the sole purpose of terrorizing the citizens into submission. It may be not the most often occurring pattern of urban war, but a very significant one.

2. It may also be a blockade with the purpose of destroying normal life in the city.

3. It may be the military engagement itself, which inevitably, even if great care is taken, will evidently lead to great loss of innocent life.

3. It may be a case of terror attacks on civilians, governmental officials or the military by a insurgents or terrorists.

4. It may be the case of deliberate provoking of retaliation, when the attacks are waged from civilian facilities.

5. It may be the case of punitive strikes, which could be indiscriminate or targeted.

Of course, even targeted killings in the urban context can be destructive. Not due to the lack of the smartness of the weapon, but due to the stupidity of the human beings using the smart weapon. Besides, even, if the attacks are highly targeted, they are still morally problematic, as extrajudicial execution.

**Ethics and laws of urban warfare. Some controversies.**

The problem is of course to what extent - if at all - urban warfare can become lawful and ethical warfare. Contemporary war in the city renders the feasibility of proportionality and distinction moot. During the Second World War, urban warfare meant simply indiscriminate massive aerial bombardment of civilian population. The most notorious of these attacks was the firebombing of Dresden in February of 1945 by allied aviation, which followed the destruction of the British cities of Hull and Coventry. An estimated up to 25,000 people were killed. This kind of direct attack on civilians is now almost generally regarded as the domain of terrorism, no matter state or non-state. In 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention was drafted and a clause outlawing such attacks was considered. In 1977 two Protocols were drafted to the Fourth Geneva Convention. One of the clauses outlaws indiscriminate bombing attacks on civilian populations. The USA to date, as well as Israel have not signed it. I do not say, nevertheless, that signing the protocols is all that matters. Russia, which signed the two Protocols as well as the Geneva Conventions did not hesitate to mount indiscriminate bombing attacks on its own, predominantly ethnically Russian civilian population of Grozny in 1994-1995. Grozny was reduced to rubble and the number of civilians killed in the attack amounts to 27 thousand, according to some sources, which is 2 thousand more than the death toll of the attack on Dresden in 1945. A.C. Grayling in his 2007 book “Among the Dead Cities” poses a provoking question: Was the deliberate targeting of civilians by British aviation a military necessity or a crime? He concludes that it was not a military necessity and it was a crime. More than that. Even if it were a military necessity, it would remain a crime. Michael Walzer harbours somewhat different evaluation and justifies at least to a certain extent these attacks. This is not the only example of ethical controversies which emerge when we engage critically with cases of urban warfare. A lack of time does not allow me to expand on some other controversial problems. I only have to mention that even some less vicious forms of urban operations may trigger consequences, which are on a par with the consequences of the direct attacks on civilians mentioned above. The Kosovo War, for instance, saw the use of a bomb, which emitted graphite crystals to comprehensively disable electrical power and distribution stations. The result could be a humanitarian disaster including the breakdown of water supply and sewage system in the cities. More than that, even a blockade may be a humanitarian disaster. A 1999 UNICEF report found that 500,000 children, mostly in the cities, died as a result of sanctions against Iraq, imposed by a coalition of states immediately after Sadam’s aggression against Kuwait. The examples of ethical challenge posed by war in the cities could be continued. It is evident that war in the city poses a great challenge to both morality and legality of warfare. But, if I may use an analogy, during this conference we must lay siege to the ethical problems of urban warfare. Such problems cannot be seen as an impregnable fortress, but as a legitimate objective which merits our full attention and effort. If we make a contribution to conquering this fortress we do a great service not to ourselves, but to future generations of urban citizens.

I wish you every success.