# The recent Russian experience of humanitarian costs of urban warfare. From Chechnya to Syria. 15 minutes -2000 words

War in Grozny.

On November 29, 1994, Yeltsin ordered the Russian Federal army to “restore constitutional order” in Chechnya. It was to be Moscow’s largest military operation since Afghanistan. The Russian General Staff seem to have entertained the notion that they could quickly restore order. The Russian military, including Interior Ministry troops, numbered some 2.4 million, while the entire ethnic Chechen population in Chechnya came to just 900,000. On December 11 the Russian Federal troops launched an invasion of the Chechen Republic. Morale remained low among the Russian conscripts and Russian Federal command began to rely on long-distance artillery and aerial bombardments. Columns of refugees poured out through the unblockaded south of the city. Rules of engagement designed to avoid large scale civilian casualties were ignored. At the same time hundreds of average Chechen volunteer fighters chose not to flee the inferno, but to pour into Grozny to defend the capital. Chechens tenaciously defended the symbolic Presidential Palace, until January 19, 1995. The final stroke was when a “bunker buster” penetration bomb broke through nine floors and entered the cellar of the Presidential Palace, forcing the Chechen commander finally abandon it. Chechen rebels continued to ambush and snipe at Russian troops in southern Grozny. Chechen Chief of Staff Aslan Maskhadov continued to lead and Russian troops continued to die. It would take another month before the Russians succeeded in encircling the city with an army that had swollen to almost fifty-five thousand. While the Russians proclaimed that Grozny was theirs, it had come at a high price of as many as four thousand of soldier’s’ lives. As of the civilian casualties, Sergei Kovalev, the Russian Duma's commissioner for human rights, who had been in Grozny during part of the fighting, estimated 27,000 people, the majority of them ethnic Russians, died in five weeks of fighting, which makes about 6% of the population. Report by the Human Rights Watch denounced indiscriminate bombings and shellings by Russian forces carried out against civilian populations, consistent targeting of civilian populations by ground forces and the destruction of three hospitals, one orphanage and numerous market areas. HRW estimates at least 350,000 people were forced to flee the region due to the conflict. The attack on Grozny should be regarded as the worst possible scenario of urban warfare, not only from the ethical point of view, but tactical as well. It was waged according to the Second World War Scenario.

 The nature of war in Syria

The unrest in Syria began on 15 March 2011 as part of the wider 2011 Arab Spring protests, grew out of discontent with the Syrian government and escalated to an armed conflict after protests calling for Assad's removal were violently suppressed. The war is being fought by several factions: the Syrian Armed Forces and its domestic and international allies, a loose alliance of mostly Sunni opposition rebel groups (such as the Free Syrian Army), Salafi jihadist groups (including al-Nusra Front and Tahrir al-Sham), the mixed Kurdish-Arab Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). A number of foreign countries, such as Iran, Israel, Russia, Turkey, and the United States, have either directly involved themselves in the conflict or provided support to one or another faction.

 In September 2015 Russia got engaged in the war by that time the war had already became a “war of sieges.” The Russian general staff would not risk another bloody Chechen quagmire that would cost the lives of conscript soldiers to generate a “coffin factor”. It led to calls for the professionalization of the military. The trust was put in the Russian Aerospace Force, backed by cruise-missile firing warships and submarines to win the war. There is every reason to believe that there were earnest attempts to avoid this kind of strikes. Still, there is significant difference in the level of precision strikes between Russian and Western military. Russian guidance systems are lacking precision and there were repeated accusations that the Russian air attacks were causing civilian casualties. Evidently, there was no live drone video footage, suggesting that the Russian airforce did not have the ability to monitor targets in real time over extended periods. Nevertheless Russian forces in this engagement were on a steep learning curve and humanitarian constraints were taken very seriously**. In addition the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syrian Arab Republic was set up in February 2016.** British journalist Vanessa Beeley met Russian soldiers and officers during the siege of Aleppo and recalled they had been extensively briefed and trained to build strong good relations with Syrian military and civilian population.

 International organizations have accused not only Russian forces but virtually all sides involved, including the Ba'athist Syrian government, ISIL, opposition rebel groups, Russia, Turkey, and the U.S.-led coalition of severe IHL violations. The UN also reported in 2014 that "siege warfare is employed in a context of egregious human rights and international humanitarian law violations. The warring parties in Syria do not fear being held accountable for their acts. Armed forces of both sides of the conflict blocked access of humanitarian convoys, confiscated food, cut off water supplies and targeted farmers working their fields. As the conflict has expanded across Syria, many cities have been engulfed in a wave of crime as fighting caused the disintegration of much of the civilian state, and many police stations stopped functioning. Rates of theft increased, with criminals looting houses and stores. Rates of kidnappings increased as well.

Battle in Aleppo

Aleppo is the largest city in Syria, between the Syrian opposition (including the Free Syrian Army and other largely-Sunni groups, such as the Levant Front and the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front against the Syrian government, supported by Hezbollah, Shia militias and Russia and against the Kurdish-majority People's Protection Units (YPG). The battle began on 19 July 2012. A stalemate that had been in place for four years finally ended in July 2016, when Syrian government troops closed the rebels' last supply line into Aleppo with the support of Russian airstrikes. In response, rebel forces launched unsuccessful counteroffensives in September and October that failed to break the siege; in November, government forces embarked on a decisive campaign that resulted in the recapture of all of Aleppo by December 2016. The Syrian government victory is widely seen as a turning point in Syria's civil war. The battle was marked by widespread violence against civilians, repeated targeting of hospitals and schools (mostly by pro-government air forces and to a lesser extent by the rebels), and indiscriminate aerial strikes and shelling against civilian areas. During the 2016 Syrian government offensive, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights warned that "crimes of historic proportions" were being committed in Aleppo. The Aleppo offensive of September–October 2016 in late September 2016 by the Syrian Army and its allies aiming to capture all of the remaining rebel-held parts of the city of Aleppo. There were continuous efforts to establish humanitarian corridors. Early on 22 September 2016, the Syrian and Russian Air Forces started preparatory air-strikes for the upcoming offensive. Over 40 air-strikes were conducted against five districts throughout the day. On 17 October, Russia announced that it would temporarily halt airstrikes on eastern Aleppo for eight hours on 20 October, in order to allow some civilians and rebels to evacuate. The strikes had been halted two days earlier than intended, on the morning of 18 October, and the suspension continued into the next day when it was announced the truce scheduled to take place on 20 October, would be extended to three days until 22 October. Rebel officials completely rejected the proposal on evacuating, although 100–150 Ahrar al-Sham rebels from eastern Aleppo were evacuated in three buses destined to the Idlib Governorate. Additionally, tensions arose between different rebel factions when those that wanted to evacuate were prevented by others, and several assassinations of those who supported withdrawal took place. The al-Nusra Front reportedly carried out public executions of residents who attempted to leave the city. Fighting reportedly resumed on 22 October, with the Army making advances in Salah al-Din early on 24 October. However, Russia declared the ceasefire would continue. On 28 October, rebel forces outside Aleppo began a counter-offensive to break the siege. Tens of thousands of people began to flock in the direction of government and Russian Army refugee shelters. In December the rebel fighters were penned in to a small enclave covering only a few square kilometers in the south of the city. Russian and Turkish diplomats negotiated a ceasefire and a plan to evacuate the last rebels and their supporters from the enclave. **They were bussed to rebel lines on the western edge of Aleppo**. Hundreds of pro-governmental supporters from two besieged enclaves near Idlib city were moved the other way into Aleppo. Russian soldiers, backed by monitors from the ICRC coordinated the evacuation. So ended the greatest battle of the Syrian civil war. The Syrian army controlled the country’s second city for the first time in four years. It was a double victory for the Syria’s government. The vast majority of the population of the enclave had opted to stay with the government troops. According to ICRC monitors some 34 000 civilians and rebel fighters had boarded the buses for the journey to rebel territory around Idlib. In January 2017 the United Nations was reporting that 110 000 civilians from the enclave had gone over to the government side. **Assad and the Russian Army won the battle for the hearts and minds of Aleppo’s citizen.** Every side in the conflict needed the support of their population. The keep the population fighting they needed to be fed and protected. Leaders who could do this got the loyalty and support of their people. Those that did not soon found their population would flee. This was winning hearts and minds at its basic. Which is why amazingly on many occasions all the warring parties factions would find in their interests to cooperate, do deals or trade. Vanessa Beeley visited several of the Syrian and Russian refugee reception centers during the later states of the sieges and describes this humanitarian operation which involved the pre-positioning of field hospitals, mobile field kitchens and refugee registration facilities and extraordinary and generous. “The Russians had plan and were well organized” – she said. The aim of operation Dawn of Victory was not just to capture the territory of the enclave but to win over the hearts and minds of the population. International aid organization and the United Nations estimated that between 250 000 and 300 000 people were inside the enclave, including some 8000 fighters. Around 1000 of these were hard-line fighters of the Nusra Front and its Jihadi allies. After the siege was over on 27th February 2017 the United Nations Human Rights Council’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry published a wide-ranging report into Battle of Aleppo. It was able to confirm the death of 38 people in attacks on hospitals in east Aleppo and 34 civilians killed by rebel fire. This suggests that both sides during the Battle exaggerated the number of civilian casualties for public-relations reasons in a bid to gain international sympathy.

Ultimately, the civilian casualties during the battle of Aleppo were significantly less than during the US-led coalition forces operation to capture Mosul in Iraq, which was playing out at the same time as the battle for Aleppo. (Operation Aleppo. Russian’s War in Syria128). The majority of the population of Aleppo voted with their feet to back the Syrian government and not the rebels.