

# Urban Conflict Research Notes

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## Informative Urban Battles

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### Abstract

In trying to analyse the key elements of urban battles the various comparative studies on urban battles in the literature have been examined. Since these works are themselves trying to draw out the various lessons of urban conflict they can be assumed to be studying what are, to the authors and editors, the most informative urban battles – rather than ones that just those which have good stories or the most public awareness. This short research notes looks quantitatively at the battles covered by these studies in order to establish a list of the most “informative” urban battles. The “Top 10” informative battles identified (and the only ones covered by more than 2 sources) were: Hue, Grozny, Mogadishu, Beirut, Manila, Aachen, Stalingrad, Fallujah, Intifada/Jenin and Seoul. This list can help focus future research, and also identifies battles which should be covered by urban wargames – current coverage being presented, at a high level, in this note. The list also suggests where future comparative wargame studies might be most useful. A separate paper looks at the qualitative findings of the studies in terms of what elements and lessons of urban warfare are seen as the most important.

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*My Urban Conflict Research Notes are short papers that probably don't yet merit peer review, but which contain information which will hopefully be of interest to the wargaming and urban conflict community, and which I can publish in a more timely way than through a journal. Any comments are welcome, as are pointers to any errors and omissions. More information on my PhD in Wargaming Urban Conflict is at <http://taunoyen.com/wiki/doku.php?id=phd> and you can contact me at [david@burden.name](mailto:david@burden.name).*

### Introduction

In identifying the elements of urban conflict a key question is what battles, and what sources, to study. My current urban battles database lists over 80 battles, and *Sharp Corners* (Spiller, 2001) lists nearly 200 dating back to antiquity. The *U.S. Army Military History Institute Bibliography on Urban Combat and Street Fighting* then lists nearly 100 sources, and the Australian Army Research Centre's *Urban Warfare: A Practitioners Annotated Bibliography* (Knight et al., 2021) has around 600 sources! Since my PhD is on urban wargaming, not urban conflict itself, I feel justified in not reading everyone one of these texts and studying everyone one of the battles, and instead finding a more pragmatic approach to the challenge.

I initially thought in terms of the most “important” or “decisive” urban battles – but these tend to be quite loaded terms, with Stalingrad certainly dominating in popular culture. A better term for what I am after is probably “informative” battles – what are the battles that tell us most about what urban warfare is like, and particularly how it applies to contemporary urban warfare.

## Sources

In terms of sources I could have looked at primary sources, or single book works on each battle, but again my focus is on wargaming not warfare, and certainly with books there is a danger that it becomes a study by popularity – for instance Amazon lists 343 results for “Battle of Stalingrad”.

I decided that the best approach to the topic, and indeed the primary one that I’ve used since the start of the PhD, was in comparative studies – both in book form and in case studies. Here authors have already taken a view as to which the most informative battles are and then described and compared them (explicitly or implicitly). This then gives me a good base to work from, both to identify the most informative battles using a “poll of polls” approach, and then to use these sources to identify the most important elements of urban conflict.

The sources I have used for the comparative studies and case studies are:

- *Block by Block* (Robertson & Yates, 2003)
- *City Fights* (Antal, 2003)
- *Forests of Steel* (Antal, 2007)
- *Concrete Hell* (DiMarco, 2012)
- *Storming the City* (Wahlman, 2015)
- *British Army Review Special Report - Urban Operations Vols. 1 & 2* (2019)
- *Urban Warfare Project Case Studies/UWP Podcast* (Spencer, 2019 onwards)
- *Understanding Urban Warfare* (Collins & Spencer, 2022)
- *Blood and Concrete* (Dilegge et al, 2019)
- *Urban Operations* (Sullivan, Jones & Argomedo, 2024)
- *Canadian Armed Forces Journal Urban Operations Special* (2024)

In addition, where case studies (rather than short vignettes) were included in US and UK Urban Doctrine publications these have also been included. For a fuller list of urban related publications see my “50ish Influential Works on Urban Warfare in the last 50ish years” handout.

## Analysis

Analysing these works to identify which battles they examined resulted in

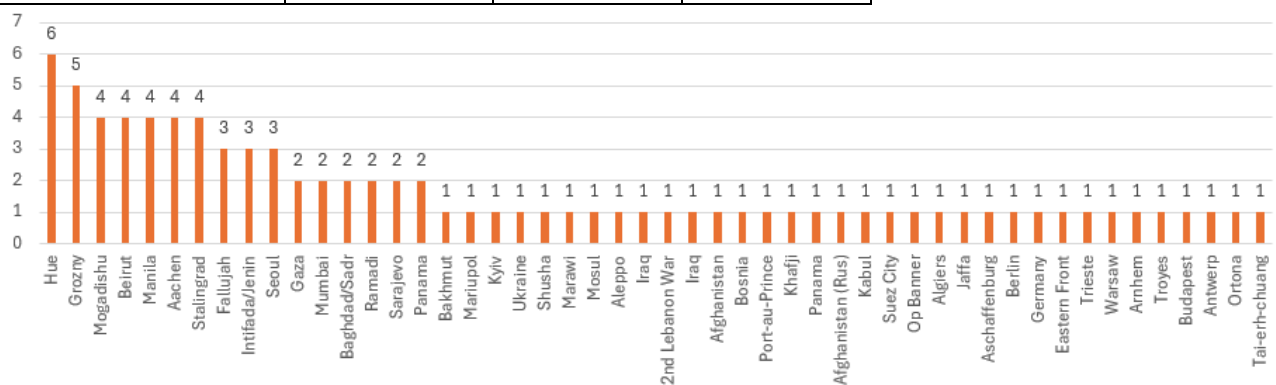
Table 1, which also shows how many wargames exist on my Urban Wargames Database<sup>1</sup> of that battle. The mention count is also shown graphically in Figure 1.

<b>Battle</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Total Mentions</b>	<b>Wargames</b>
Hue	1968	6	9
Grozny	1995	5	3
Mogadishu	1993	4	8
Beirut	1982	4	2
Manila	1945	4	3
Aachen	1944	4	1
Stalingrad	1942	4	28
Fallujah	2004	3	10
Intifada/Jenin	2002	3	0
Seoul	1950	3	1
Gaza	2023	2	1
Mumbai	2008	2	0
Baghdad/Sadr	2004	2	2
Ramadi	2004	2	1
Sarajevo	1992	2	0
Panama	1989	2	0
Bakhmut	2023	1	1
Mariupol	2022	1	0
Kyiv	2022	1	0
Ukraine	2022	1	1
Shusha	2020	1	0
Marawi	2017	1	0
Mosul	2016	1	3
Aleppo	2012	1	0
2nd Lebanon War	2006	1	0
Mosul	2004	1	0
Al Hillah (Iraq)	2003	1	0
Afghanistan	2001	1	0

<sup>1</sup> <https://airtable.com/shreVPHaoJBpxGzFj>

Battle	Date	Total Mentions	Wargames
Bosnia	1997	1	1
Port-au-Prince	1994	1	0
Khafji	1991	1	0
Panama	1989	1	0
Afghanistan (Rus)	1979	1	1
Kabul	1979	1	0
Suez City	1973	1	1
Northern Ireland	1969+	1	0
Algiers	1956	1	0
Jaffa	1948	1	0
Aschaffenburg	1945	1	0
Berlin	1945	1	6
Germany	1945	1	0
Eastern Front	1945	1	0
Trieste	1945	1	1
Warsaw	1944	1	5
Arnhem	1944	1	1
Troyes	1944	1	0
Budapest	1944	1	2
Antwerp	1944	1	0
Ortona	1943	1	5
Tai-erh-chuang	1938	1	1

*Table 1: The Most Informative Battles - and a count of the wargames of them*



*Figure 1: The Most Informative Urban Battles - Graph*

What is particularly striking from the list and graph is the long tail, with 34 of the 50 battles having only one mention.

## Limitations

In interpreting this list, some consideration should be given to the bias that may lie behind and within the sources used, notably:

- Most are American, and so focus on engagements involving American forces;
- Almost half (and all the major works) were written at the time of the various Middle Eastern wars when a counter-insurgency, rather than large-scale combat operations mindset dominated;
- None of the sources give a concise explanation as to why they chose the battles they covered, and why others were rejected.

Also the fact that out of 11 sources only one battle appears in at least half of them (Hue), and that there is such a long tail of single mentions suggests that here is no clear consensus as to what the most “informative” battles are, and that choices have potentially been driven by the author/editors own interests, those which they think their target audiences might be most interested in, or those which they think are under-discussed/less-known and so they can present as new and original material to make their book different from others. However, when it comes to the second elements of this study, the qualitative analysis of lessons and elements, this breadth of battles is useful as it hopefully helps avoid the data being skewed by a few over-studied battles.

## Conclusions

This list can help to focus further study, and in particular supports a focus on wargames of those battles to see how well they reflect the important lessons which are meant to be drawn from those battles. Conveniently my first comparative wargame study was on Hue (Burden, 2023), a decision based on the fact that it was the second most popular wargamed urban battle (after Stalingrad) – but which just happens to also top the list as the most informative battle! Battles with zero wargames are prime opportunities for new games – and something that I’m exploring with a “One Page Urban” wargame model which can be applied to multiple battles.

*Note: A one page “infographic” of the data is available for download from my [PhD Wiki](#).*

## References

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