

German military historians predict Anglo-American defeat in Iraq

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March 29, 2003—Never in the history of war have such formidable cities as Baghdad been conquered militarily by an invading army. The single exception may be the recent Russian siege of Grozny (400,000 inhabitants), but the focused brutality of its assault may not be easily replicated on Baghdad's 5 million inhabitants under the eyes of a watchful and angry planet.

Indeed, the invaders have but two choices: to incinerate the city or to starve it. Recently declared a military target, Basra's civilians, for example, have automatically been militarized. This means fighting in the streets. And this type of fighting cannot be won.

This is the opinion of an eminent and nationally respected German scholar, Dr. Manfred Messerschmidt, 76, leading historian of the Research Department of Military History in Freiburg, Germany. Controversial and at times inconvenient, Dr. Messerschmidt's views command respect even among his critics.

Dr. Messerschmidt's considered opinion is that a defeat of the Anglo-American forces is very probable. If Saddam Hussein's regime can manage to stay in power, the conquest of Baghdad is impossible, unless the two allies raze and burn the city to the ground.

Possessed of a clinically analytical and sharp historical memory, Europeans have been drawing analogies between Bush's war and WW II since the fateful "axis-of-evil" speech, which caused a giggling disbelief mixed with mounting alarm that the citizens of the most powerful state on earth should be bamboozled by a Hollywood-style script of no historical accuracy whatsoever. Germany, Japan, and Italy—the original Axis—were each a modern military machine of astounding size and force.

Bush's axis was a collection of third-rate powers of no world-domination potential whatsoever. The Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis' war machine had a clear goal: to rule the globe.

They didn't count, however, on people's resistance to their plans of domination. Invasion offered no alternative: either one submitted or one fought. There were things worth dying for—things that gave life meaning.

The siege of Leningrad and Stalingrad in WW II illustrate the flaw in the fantasy of invasion by superior military force. Besieged by the Nazis for the famed 900

days, Leningrad resisted, in spite of millions of corpses—the victims of starvation—littering the city, freezing in the snow. In Stalingrad, Hitler's Sixth Army was entirely obliterated. The Russian winter, with its blinding storms, rendered the mighty Luftwaffe, Hitler's equivalent in military novelty to the arsenal of techno-weapons today, entirely useless in terms of delivering supplies and providing aggressive or cover operations.

The defeat of Germany's "Operation Barbarossa," to conquer the Soviet Union and provide Germany with more "living space," turned the tide of WW II. The hitherto unstoppable Nazi war machine had been stopped by the Russian people, united against the invasion, by 1942, a month after the United States entered the Pacific War. As many Europeans acknowledge, Europe's liberation was effected by the heroism of the Soviet people in defense of their homeland.

These heroic battles, singularly in the case of Stalingrad, show that fighting in the streets of a city ends in its destruction and in an appalling number of casualties of both civilians and military personnel.

The German Wermacht, in its Barbarossa invasion of the USSR, at first hesitated to enter Stalingrad until Hitler himself ordered that either the city be destroyed or starved. Neither in Leningrad, where the strategy was starvation, nor in Stalingrad, where both bombing and urban battles were engaged, did the strategies work. A city with a population of millions cannot be secured. Invasion forces can only concentrate and hold on to stationary, select positions. Should it become possible to enter a city after punishing bombings, the tanks cannot move in the streets for the rubble and the debris. This happened in Stalingrad.

German military historians, such as Dr. Messerschmidt, are convinced that if the British and the Americans manage to conquer Baghdad, this feat would be a first in the history of humanity for a city of this size.

Dr. Gerd Krumeich, a professor at the University of Dusseldorf, has a similar opinion. He recalls that in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, Paris fell only because the entire French army, including the French emperor, surrendered, and because supplies to the city were catastrophically unplanned.

American planners of the attack on Iraq apparently believed that the Iraqi people would desert Saddam.

This expectation has not materialized. If the Iraqis continue to resist the invasion, the technological superiority of weapons and air power of the Anglo-American forces will be useless in the event of fighting in the streets of Baghdad. This battle will not be bloodless.

In addition, once the allies enter Baghdad, smart bombs will have to be very smart indeed to distinguish between friend and foe. Should B-52s be sent “to soften” the city, prior to invasion, bombardments will only serve to unite the population behind Saddam. In WW II, allied bombardments of German cities awakened loyalty to Hitler, in spite of his obviously tyrannical and disastrous regime.

Another military historian, Dr. Bernhard Kroener of the University of Potsdam, is convinced that “If resistance occurs, a major city cannot be conquered.”

Again, in the experience of WWII, Paris (1940) and Rome (1944) were occupied by the Germans because they did not resist. The city of Saigon (now Ho-Chi-Minh City), in South Vietnam, was taken in 1975 by the Vietnamese people, not by foreign invaders.

European perspectives on war have changed, says Kroener. Aerial bombardments, such as the ones that hit Hamburg, resulting in 30,000 deaths within two nights, are no longer feasible; neither is a street war in Baghdad. “Anyone, who is not a complete idiot, will try to prevent this. It is impossible to win,” says Kroener. If the allied invasion army means to seal off the entire city, it will need far more troops than it has now and had better count on a siege duration of a month or even a year.

The original idea of “conquering Baghdad” presumed that the population would remain passive. Even if the population remains inactive, however, a mere group of elite soldiers could still organize an effective resistance in defense of the city. Dr. Bernhard Kroener suggests that the US/UK military planners do some reading in some old but valid texts. The collected works of Mao Zedong would show, for example, that the guerrilla warrior moves within the population as smoothly as a fish through water. This is how Iraqi commandos will act to defend Baghdad.

The German military has been forbidden from commenting on the Iraqi war. This applies to the press office of the Bundeswehr, as well as to the Department of Research in Potsdam, regarding military history. However, retired members of the military, such as Brigadier Helmut Hauff, former chief commander of the German troops in Kosovo and now CEO of the Defense Industry Committee, are more honest and open.

Hauff agrees with German military historians. “To conquer Baghdad through military means is impossible. There will be a year-long, house-to-house fighting in the streets, a real mini-terror war.”

This has been already observed and proven in the relatively small city of Mogadishu, in Somalia. There, Americans had to draw back because public opinion in the USA turned against the adventure when resentment of the Somalian people against US forces became patently obvious and uncompromising.