

# BEYOND “GOOD” AND “BAD” LESSONS: A COMPARISON OF THE USE OF HISTORY BY THE BRITISH ARMY AND THE GERMAN BUNDESWEHR IN AFGHANISTAN

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# Can the study of the past have operational utility for the present?

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## Diverging opinions on the utility of studying history for the making of military strategy:

- A source of directly applicable organizational knowledge? (cf. Cassidy 2004; Nagl 2002)
- A training ground for the strategic mind? (cf. Clausewitz 1853)
- A potentially useful, however often too superficially useful heuristic device? (cf. Neustadt/May 1986; Khong 1992)
- A dangerous substitute for objective situational assessment, biased by superficial similarities, dominant personal experiences as well as organizational interests (cf. Jervis 1976; Bailey 2006; Strachan 2006, 2007)

→ *This debate assumes that there are “good” and “bad” lessons and the challenge is to differentiate between them*

# Can the study of the past have operational utility for the present?

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## ↔ **Alternative, pragmatist perspective, based on Kornprobst 2007:**

- Historical analogies are not intrinsically “good” or “bad” but can generate useful knowledge as long as they are linked to debates on their appropriateness and applicability
- → The true utility is not the individual content of the lesson but the extent to which it sparks intellectual debate and leads, as a result, to an improved shared understanding of the present

# Presentation of the research project

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- Comparative PhD Study at the European University Institute, 2008-2012
- Main interest: **how do contemporary military organizations learn from their historical experience?**
- Use of personal interviews, memoirs, doctrinal documents, operational reports
- Full study published in 2014 under the title: “Historical experience: Burden or Bonus in Today’s Wars? The British Army and the German Bundeswehr in Afghanistan”

# The British Army in Helmand

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- Initial deployment to Helmand (summer 2006), shaped by a lack of institutional interest in historical lessons:
  - Lack of institutional analysis both of the local historical context and of resulting implications for operational design
  - few operational ‘buzz-words’ derived from the Malaya campaign (“ink-spots”, “hearts and minds”) without attempts to achieve a consensual interpretation of these concepts
  - Individual, implicit historical lessons of ground commanders („warlike xenophobic society“) favour a perception of a trial of strength between ISAF and Taliban forces

# The British Army in Helmand

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- Increased debate on the validity of historical experience following perceived defeat in Iraq
  - U.S. operational and doctrinal success exposes the shortcomings of “perceived experience” in British COIN
  - Key thinkers (John Kiszely, Alex Alderson) of the British Army problematize the “neglect” of historical lessons as a means to foster internal debate and to stimulate doctrinal innovation
- Since 2009: “Rediscovery” of historical lessons analysis as one means to realize “Operation entirety”
  - Teaching of the enduring value of the „classical“ principles through comparative campaign history (AFM 1 Part 10)
  - Opening to academic exchange, production of lesson pamphlets by the Land Warfare Development Group and the Afghan COIN Centre
  - Stronger emphasis on COIN history in officer education
- Result: a more consensual understanding of campaign priorities and a stronger integration of kinetic and non-kinetic activities

# The German Bundeswehr in Kunduz

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## **The Bundeswehr's ambiguous relation to the use of history:**

- Bundeswehr was created with the ambition to break all links with the past of its predecessor institutions ('Zero hour')
- Civil-military leadership prescribed official traditions as source of professional identity, NOT of operational thought → attempt to destroy the utilitarian conception of "battle history" of the General Staff
- ⇔ Informally, since the 1950s the Wehrmacht experience has been the only effectively used source of historical lessons for doctrine and tactics, including (initially) for the conduct of nuclear war
- Even after the end of the Cold War, there was a complete absence of interest in historical lessons from expeditionary / COIN warfare



# The German Bundeswehr in Kunduz

- Initial deployment to Kunduz (summer 2003)
  - No explicit analysis of historical lessons as a source of operational planning
  - Operational understanding shaped by the unconscious projection of experience from previous Balkans deployments: impartiality, non-coercive approach, low-profile patrols, limited reconstruction activities
- The reaction to the spreading insurgency after 2006:
  - Reactive adaptation, initially only reinforced self-protection, then slow switch to offensive force posture
  - Official switch to counterinsurgency approach since September 2009 (following Kunduz air strike)
  - COIN approach was commonly interpreted as a „return“ to the principles of classical combat
  - Even after 2009: Absence of an integrated civil-military operational strategy, little institutional debate on key principles such as the protection of the population; perception of a lack of strategic guidance

# The German Bundeswehr in Kunduz

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## **Absence of historical analysis = absence of institutional debate?**

- German doctrine contains highly abstract procedural guidelines, generally lacks contextualisation
- Existing military journals and staff courses focus almost exclusively on management and technological while official history guide for the ISAF mission is written from an entirely non-strategic perspective
- → officers continued to complain about a lack of internal doctrinal and operational debate and of a general lack of critical thinking within the institution

# The utility of debating the present through the lens of the past

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- Despite doubts on the effectiveness of the British Army in Afghanistan, its “rediscovery” of British COIN experience demonstrates how historical lessons can nurture institutional self-interrogation and the building of a more consensual understanding of doctrine
- Regardless the type of future operations, the **promotion of institutional debate and critical reflection on current strategies will remain crucial**, especially in times of a widening gap between financial budgets and political demands
- The **institutional acknowledgement and encouragement of “revisionist” thinking** as integral part of the production of useful operational knowledge is key to a better integration of historical analysis into the process of strategy-making

# Thank you for your attention

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Questions, comments?  
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