The effects of layered military culture: British military uses of historical lessons during the war in Afghanistan

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**Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THINKING ABOUT HISTORICAL LESSONS FOR AFGHANISTAN IN THE BRITISH ARMY</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of the analysed sources</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracting historical lessons for Afghanistan: from the universally valid principles of British counterinsurgency to the specific character of Afghan society</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons from the Anglo-Afghan Wars</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons from the comparative analysis of British campaigns of colonial retreat</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result of the analysis: A paradoxical lack of compatibility between historical lessons</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FROM IMPROVISATION TO GUIDING PRINCIPLES: A LAYERED MILITARY CULTURE</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The institutional culture of the late Victorian Army: Decentralized improvisation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The layering process induced by World War II</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1 This paper is partly based on research produced as part of the author's PhD research project, conducted at the European University Institute in Florence between 2008 and 2012. I would like to thank Col Rupert Wieloch and Dr Chris Tripodi who facilitated access to material used in this research. Author's contact: eric.sangar@eui.eu
Introduction

The assumption that experience enables us to understand the world better is a central tenet of Western political and social thought. A similar implicit assumption can be observed in the existing literature on the making of military strategy. Many strategic thinkers, but also empirical analysts, assume that the military can and should learn from past experience and thus be better prepared for warfare in the present. Ideally, experience from the past is perceived to have a cumulative effect: because the repetitive confrontation with similar situations enables military leaders to constantly refine their approach, the thus accumulated experience ought to make the task of adaptation to new situations easier. On the tactical level, the emphasis on the constant repetition of battle drills is an illustration of this assumption. Another illustration of the perceived value of accumulated experience is the piece “The Defence of Duffer’s Drift”, written by the British officer Cpt Swindon in 1904\(^2\). This text covers a series of dreams by a young British infantry officer who repeatedly finds himself confronted with securing and defending a river crossing. As he can remember and thus correct mistakes from one dream to the next, he is able to increasingly recognize the complexity of his mission and to adapt his approach accordingly. The cumulative effect of all lessons eventually enable him to defend the crossing successfully and to wake up.

However, is it possible to make analogical arguments for the level of operational strategy? Can military organizations successfully learn from historical experience to develop and adapt military strategy for present-day conflicts? There is no substantial agreement on this. On the one hand, some authors argue that experience from the past does enhance a military organization’s capability to adapt for the difficult requirement in today’s complex stabilisation operations, especially compared to armies with shorter institutional memories (Cassidy, 2004, 77; Sharpe, 2005). On the other hand, military historians have argued time and again that military organizations are at best capable of biased and selective learning from past conflict (Bailey, 2006), and that any profound academic study of historical lessons contradicts the prevailing “can-do” mentality of Western military officers (Kiszely, 2006; Sinnreich, 2006). This contribution aims at shedding some empirical light on this debate by analysing the uses of historical experience made by the British Army within the context of the ISAF mission. For two reasons, this empirical focus suits best to explore the research interest described above.

\(^2\) The text is available for free download here: [http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/24842](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/24842)
First, the British Army can be seen as a most likely case of a military organization with a rich stock of historical experience, accumulated during a continuous institutional history dating back to the early 18th century. Throughout its history, the British Army has been confronted both with the conduct of high-intensity interstate warfare and the conduct of so-called small wars on various colonial deployments throughout the British Empire. Core lessons of the latter experience have been codified by various writers considered today as classics of counterinsurgency theory, including C.E. Callwell, Robert Thompson, and Frank Kitson. The emergence of this literature by British writers has led some scholars to the conclusion that the British Army has over time produced and refined a distinct ‘British’ model of counterinsurgency (Mockaitis, 1995) and thus a uniquely ‘British’ contribution to Western military thought (Beckett, 1992).

Second, the focus on the ISAF mission enables best to trace possible independent effects of historical experience on military decision-making. The ISAF mission confronted the participating national armies with tough strategic choices: vague and ambitious political goals such as the support to the reconstruction of the Afghan central state and the provision of security and development had to be pursued in a context with very limited available manpower, a lack of intelligence on political and economic structures at the local and district level, and an on-going counterterrorist campaign led by the US. Furthermore, despite ISAF’s hierarchical design, the national contingents did possess a relatively large degree of decision-making autonomy. In the case of the British Army, which since 2006 has assumed the command over ISAF operations in the South-Afghan province of Helmand, the autonomy of the British military effort in Helmand even resulted in the unofficial term “Helmandshire” (Marston, 2008, 4). Indeed, a number of operational analyses confirmed that the operational level command of the British Army enjoyed such a degree of decision-making autonomy that, as occurred in summer 2006, it could unilaterally decide on profound geographical changes to the original operational strategy, adopted on the government level.

The following analysis proceeds in three steps: First, an empirical overview of a variety of lessons that were discussed within the British Army for present operations in Afghanistan will show that the British Army was discussing lessons from mainly two historical contexts with largely contradicting operational recommendations. Second, a more theoretical analysis will try to make sense of the presented findings: by introducing the concept of "layered culture", the analysis will show that the effects of historical experience are far more complex than the usual
dichotomy of “forgetting” versus “remembering” would suggest. Third, I will present some arguments that will demonstrate the effects of layered institutional culture on the actual use of historical experience within British operational strategy-making in Afghanistan.

**Thinking about historical lessons for Afghanistan in the British Army**

**Description of the analysed sources**

The empirical analysis draws on two sources: first, a sample of 29 Defence Research Papers which connect references to the British imperial past with normative recommendations for the contemporary conflict in Afghanistan. The analysed papers were written between 2001 and 2010 by officers participating in the “Advanced Command and Staff Course” of the Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC), which unites future British staff officers, thus a relatively advanced career level. The participants of the staff course can freely choose the subject of their paper, and those selected here do not represent the majority of all papers written. The authors therefore must have had a special curiosity in choosing historical subjects, and their thoughts and conclusions may not represent opinions consensually shared by their fellow officers, let alone the military leadership in general. On the other hand, just like papers written in a university course, we may consider these papers to examples of individual officers developing historical arguments that were presented in the framework of their education.

The second source of analysis consists of three pamphlets on historical lessons, produced by the British Army’s Land Warfare Centre in 2010. The pamphlets present short historical overviews on not more than 40 pages in length, and have the concrete function of increasing the level of historical understanding of senior NCOs and officers deployed to Afghanistan. Because of their official character, the pamphlets must be endorsed by the senior Army leadership and were thus subject to a process of peer-review. They can therefore be considered as officially endorsed lessons taken from historical experience. Aside from the illustrative use of historical references in the counterinsurgency doctrine manual published in 2010, the three historical lesson pamphlets represent the only known documents to present institutionally endorsed lessons taken from the British imperial experience and applied to operations in Afghanistan. One of the pamphlets discusses lessons from the Anglo-Afghan Wars (as well as the Soviet occupation); the two others focus on lessons derived from historical counterinsurgency campaigns, one dealing with the role of Protected Communities, the other
with the use of indigenous forces. In the last two pamphlets, Malaya figures prominently, however alongside other historical campaigns that were predominantly fought by British, but also by American, French and other armed forces.

The pamphlets represent an attempt to reconcile the potentially conflicting needs for precise historical analysis and for the provision of sufficiently short and usable lessons for officers on operational deployment: While all pamphlets follow academic standards regarding the provision of bibliographic references, the text is written in a short and plain writing style, clearly structured in numbered paragraphs, and frequently illustrated by historical maps, drawings, and photographs. Each pamphlet contains around 40 to 50 book-format pages and can thus be read and digested in not more than an afternoon. Apparently, there was little hierarchical control on the contents of the pamphlets: Maj Ross, author of the pamphlet covering lessons from the Anglo-Afghan experience, remembers that “I was pretty free to choose whatever I was thinking, apart from quoting Winston Churchill, who said, after taking part in the Mayland Field Force, ‘don’t go there’. So I was asked not to quote that.” (Interview with Maj Ross)

After this initial overview, what are the concrete lessons discussed for Afghanistan? Is there a synthesis of lessons collected in contexts separated by continents in space – and a period of more than a hundred years in time?

**Extracting historical lessons for Afghanistan: from the universally valid principles of British counterinsurgency to the specific character of Afghan society**

**Lessons from the Anglo-Afghan Wars**

A high number of officer papers and the pamphlet on lessons from the Anglo-Afghan Wars³ extract lessons from the Anglo-Afghan experience and link these to recommendations for the contemporary military approach. Most contributions have one common feature: they paint a picture of Afghan society that traditionally embraces independence as a primary political value and rejects any foreign influence as a matter of principle. Still, the authors diverge profoundly in the normative conclusions that they derive from this assumption.

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³ Prior to the ISAF deployment, the British Army had fought three wars in Afghanistan (1839–42; 1878–80; 1919).
The futility of attempts to control a culture of warlike resistance

This divergence is especially surprising the moment that most of the papers share similar characterizations of Afghan social history. A good example is given by a 2006 paper discussing lessons from the three Anglo-Afghan Wars. In his descriptions of the historical traits of Afghan society, the author establishes the social character of Afghans as line of continuity, portraying it as notoriously resistant to foreign interventions, unconditionally bound by the code of Pashtunwali⁴, and rigorously adherent to radical versions of Islam. Thus, the author concludes that attempts to influence Afghan culture, because of its fierce independence, are prone to result in a clash of cultures:

“all of the lessons examined in this paper are joined by one constant, the character of the Afghan himself and the resultant clash of cultures. [...] The code of Pashtunwali still governs the way in which a Pushtun lives his life and as such the characteristics that this code bestows upon the Pushtun race are as relevant today as they were during Britain’s Afghan Wars. Key amongst these characteristics is the Afghans fierce sense of personal independence [...] an Afghan’s desire to fight the foreigner, even if the results of a foreigner’s presence will eventually bring benefits, and secondly the fact that an Afghan can repeatedly swap sides in a war and still be regarded as honourable. Finally, and most pertinent in the clash of cultures, is the lesson that militant Islam is not a new concept and the power of the mullahs over the people remains as strong today is it was in the 1800’s.” (Crawley, 2006, 21-22)

But the staff officer candidates disagree on the conclusions that are to be drawn from the inherent Afghan resistance to foreign interference and domination. A first strand of lessons could be summarised under the term ‘cultural pessimism’. From this perspective, neither political negotiations, nor the use of coercive force will lead to lasting success. The First Anglo-Afghan War has already proved that attempts to control the Afghans by relying on appeasement and negotiation were a dead end. Consequently, any attempt to achieve victory in Afghanistan relies on the “requirement to utterly defeat your enemy [which] was learned by the British in the second Anglo-Afghan war.” (Crawley, 2006, 7) But while the determined use

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⁴ According to a 2006 document containing cultural background information for British commanders, Pashtunwali comprises the following aspects: “Pashtunwali literally means the ‘way of the Pashtuns’. It is the rules, regulations and laws of the Pashtun tribes and has helped protect the tribal identity of the Pashtuns over 2000 years. [...] The three inviolable principles of Pashtunwali are (in Pashtu): Melmastia – means to show generous hospitality to all visitors without any hope of remuneration. [...] Badal – literally means revenge, but means specifically to avenge a wrong. [...] An insult will evoke an insult and that in turn will lead to a cycle of violence (murder). Nanawatey – is derived from the verb meaning to "go in" and means to offer sanctuary to one who seeks it.” (British Army, 2006)
of force may be more effective in terms of instilling respect and authority, the fact remains that foreign interference as such will continue to provoke conflict and violent resistance.

As a result, the author, with regard to the contemporary strategy, remains profoundly sceptical of the prospects of a strategy based on the support of the Afghan central government with the use of foreign forces: “Hamid Karzai is seen as a foreign puppet and the coalition are held responsible for denying the Afghan his individual freedom of action. As such the continued presence of western forces within Afghanistan is generating hatred and initiating a jihad.” (Crawley, 2006, 19). This pessimistic interpretation is shared by others: Portraying the effect of the Anglo-Afghan Wars as an effective reinforcement of the Afghans’ sense of independence, one author concludes that “If the current political model does not reflect the fundamental nature of Afghan society, then the lessons of history have shown that it is likely to meet with resistance, and ultimately failure.” (Fox, 2007, 45) Therefore, “like communist ideology, western liberal democracy has little relevance amongst the rural tribes who have failed to grasp ideology and might consider the concept of free and fair elections as contrary to their own leadership models.” (Fryer, 2008, 40-41) A last text of this strand comes to the pessimistic conclusion that because of the number of historically persisting religious, ethnic and economic divisions, “Afghanistan seems to be a state beyond repair.” (Challen, 2008, 32)

**Stability through indirect rule: Buying support, working with the tribes**

Other lessons draw more optimistic conclusion from past British involvement in Afghanistan. One of the main themes is the recommendation of techniques of indirect rules that seemed to maintain control of Afghan politics through much of the 19th century.

Some of the interpretations developed from this perspective see a key lesson in the manipulation of tribal allegiances through the use of financial incentives. According to this point of view, Afghan tribes fight foreign forces primarily out of self-interest: “when the benefits are large enough, the Afghans are prepared to forget past allegiances and change accordingly.” (Szalay, 2002, 21) Thus, they can and should be bought into supporting the government and isolating the insurgents because this approach worked well during the previous Anglo-Afghan Wars: “If it was in their interest they [the tribes] would settle with the British and, in return for financial remuneration, agree not to attack lines of communications.” (Orr Ewing, 2007, 24) The conclusion for today is that rather than imposing centralized order by force, it is historically more reasonable to attempt to make a deal with the tribes:
“Tribal influence has always determined the outcome of all previous campaigns and looks to play a major part in the current campaign. […] They must therefore be persuaded to support the Afghan Government’s cause and this may require payment in cash or kind for the foreseeable future.” (Orr Ewing, 2007, 32)

However, “buying” the support of the tribes is not seen by all authors as the most important lesson to be had from the imperial past for today’s strategy. This is because financial incentives can only modify short term interests but cannot remove the relentless desire for independence. In contrast, a policy of indirect influence, exercised by Political Officers through local tribal structures, has been seen to be the most lasting and thus effective strategy (Taylor, 2009, 10). Herein lies the key lesson for today’s operational strategy – the need for the subtle transformation of Afghan governance at the local level, a transformation that maintains the appearance of independence and at the same time brings tribal structures under closer central government control:

“British success at the operational level was founded in a local approach to governance that addressed Pashtun needs and created a dependency, but was always backed up by a credible threat of force. [...] Security, good governance and hence regional stability must therefore be achieved by invisibly increasing indigenous governance capability” (Taylor, 2009, 20)

Other papers make also reference to the role of the Political Officers as key elements of an imperial approach that was more reliant on a skilful understanding of local politics than on overwhelming force. In the eyes of these authors, Political Officers assured a degree of ‘cultural awareness’ on the tactical and operational level that was much deeper than the one that may be found in the British military of today:

“The soldier-scholar-diplomats of the nineteenth century East India Company [...] appeared to have been intelligent, independent, resourceful linguists who could be relied up on to ‘get alongside’ the local tribes. [...] instinct suggest[s] that the military could continue to produce them, with thorough language training and an investment in time that would allow them to become a deep specialist [and] would, it is felt, pay dividends in providing enhanced cultural situational awareness to commanders.” (Gadie, 2010, 28)

5 For a thorough discussion of the function and effects of British Political Officers in Anglo-Afghan relations, see Tripodi (2008).
While the figure of the imperial Political Officers can indeed serve as an historical inspiration for the acquisition of thorough familiarity with local society, the results they obtained also prove that in the end, cultural knowledge does not guarantee success per se. Despite the local knowledge of “Political Officers [...] it has been suggested that if the tribes ‘...wanted to misbehave, no amount of cultural understanding or awareness could possibly resist centuries of tradition’.” (Frost, 2009, 23) One important lesson that can be drawn from indirect rule during the British Empirie, therefore, is to accept that Afghan politics have their own pace, and that therefore Western actors have to limit their ambitions for fast and decisive political change. This has important implications for the military planning process, which focusses on the achievement of results within the period of deployment tours that last usually only six months. Recognizing that changing Afghan society will take time would imply acknowledging that "culture in the Middle East does not accept the hard and fast manner in which operational commanders seek to achieve effect, playing the long game, though resource intensive, is more likely to bring enduring stability and success.” (Frost, 2009, 36)

**The limited compatibility of lessons from British experience in Afghanistan**

As demonstrated above, the opinions of British officers as to which lessons are to be drawn from Anglo-Afghan history vary greatly. This observation can also be intuited from the operational lessons identified by the Land Warfare Centre pamphlet. The pamphlet attempts to reconcile various interpretations, which also appear in the individual Defence Research Papers; however, contradictions are clearly visible. To illustrate this, Afghan society is historically perceived to be xenophobic and responsive only to the use of force:

“*The Afghans are a proud and independent people who resent foreign interference and especially foreign militaries that they construe as occupation forces. They have always resisted external forces and attempts to change traditional ways; however when they have been subjugated albeit temporarily, they have responded to forceful if not punitive approaches. [...] there is room for reintegration and possibly reconciliation but only when the use of force against insurgents has applied enough pressure on the insurgent/tribesman that his options are limited enough to make him want to move from one side to the other.*” (Land Warfare Development Group, 2010a, 39)

If the imposition of peace through coercion is, indeed, one of the operational lessons, this last will pose no small amount of problems when applied to the contemporary political
environment which, according to the pamphlet, places a higher value on moral righteousness than on political effectiveness:

“The difficulty is that today’s more enlightened approach prevents this; therefore the issue is how to bridge the gap between a society which respects the use of force, and does not respect those who fail to use it, and a liberal democratic approach.” (Land Warfare Development Group, 2010a, 39)

How can the military, under these circumstances, help to stabilize the Afghan state and central government? The pamphlet does not resolve this uneasy constellation, nor does it refer explicitly to counterinsurgency doctrine. Therefore, the potentially conflicting effects that the reliance on the use of force could have on the perceptions of the local population are not discussed. Indeed, the role of the population seems to be perceived as having secondary importance compared to the position of tribal leaders, whose consent and participation are required to make central government work.

To facilitate the task of strengthening central government, there is some indication (without explicit reference to the figure of the Political Officer) that the military will have to engage in non-kinetic activities on the local level in order to build government structures from the bottom up. This may be considered to be another lesson taken from the repeated historical failures to install government from the top because “the general character of tribal society requires a local/district approach to building power.” (Land Warfare Development Group, 2010a, 39)

**Conclusion**

In sum, the operational level lessons retrieved from the Anglo-Afghan experience reflect varying and partially conflicting interpretations. Although the offered lessons generally share a common perception of Afghan society, which is seen to intrinsically distrust all foreign presences and to be characterized by the inherently treacherous nature of tribal politics, they oscillate between contradicting recommendations: the call for a credible use of force on the one hand, and the recognition of the need for sensitive operational adaptation through the building of local knowledge, trustful relationships with the tribes, and the development of culturally aware forms of influence on the other. Is the determination to apply kinetic force against insurgents a precondition to achieving trust and influence on the local level? Or, on the contrary, could tribal leaders possibly perceive the decisive use of force as another attempt to
install central government from the outside, and thus be pushed to unit themselves once again in violent insurrection against the government and the foreign forces? Most contributions, including the Land Warfare Centre pamphlet, remain ambiguous with regards to how the inherently contradicting operational lessons resulting from historical analysis may be reconciled.

Furthermore, there is little reference to lessons taken from other contexts. How are the lessons that have been extracted from the Anglo-Afghan context compatible with the lessons taken from other sources of historical experience? Are there possible implications or obstacles to the transфerral of lessons from Malaya, for instance? The discussed documents essentially do not touch upon these considerations. The next section will explore what lessons were discussed from alternative historical contexts.

**Lessons from the comparative analysis of British campaigns of colonial retreat**

According to the examined materials, the main alternative source of lessons for contemporary Afghanistan is the history of British counterinsurgency operations in the period following World War II. Malaya and Aden are the campaigns that authors most often refer to.

**The continuous validity of British counterinsurgency principles**

The key role that British counterinsurgency principles have played in the past and their continuous relevance for contemporary operations is the first and dominant theme that will be discussed. One author, in a paper written in 2003, emphasizes the universal applicability of the heritage of British counterinsurgency principles. In his eyes, “since 1945 the British have established a basic framework for success [...] [which] includes joint control, hearts and minds, intelligence, security of bases, planned patterns of operations, seizing and holding the initiative, speed, mobility and flexibility”. (O’Connor, 2003, 20) These principles have not lost their relevance in the contemporary environment, regardless of the type of operation to which they are applied: “not only are the principles contained in British COIN doctrine relevant to modern COIN operations they are also applicable to a wide range of conflict situations, from peacekeeping to general war.” (O’Connor, 2003, 29-30)

The idea that the ‘classical’ British counterinsurgency principles continue to be relevant re-emerges in the officer papers from 2007 on. One author warns against focussing too exclusively on using the Malaya experience as a model: “There is a danger that superficial study of the [Malaya] Emergency underplays the importance of specific circumstances for British
success and produces a template for future operations, rather than a set of guiding principles.” (Butcher, 2007, 10) The paper recommends instead that a comparative analysis of historical experience from several British campaigns be conducted. Thus, it reaches the conclusion that the violation of key principles was common to the defeats in Palestine and Aden, which similarly shared the constant failures to develop a long-term approach, to create sufficient intelligence and to respect the rule of the law. In contrast, a common element of Malaya and Dhofar is that in these campaigns, success came in the end after adherence to the principles was achieved:

“Both campaigns were destined for an insurgent victory as the failure to create a government strategy in accordance with the underlying COIN principles played into the insurgents’ hands. It was only once significant changes were made in accordance with those principles that the setbacks were reversed and eventual success achieved.” (Butcher, 2007, 27)

Other papers come to essentially similar conclusions. The one essential lesson that can be derived from comparing various British COIN campaigns after World War II is the identification of a set of principles that contain

“the need for a political primacy, the twofold benefits of gaining the support of the people, which both denies the insurgent the support of the population and enables the campaign intelligence gathering operation, the use of minimum force and tactical flexibility through decentralised command and control, encouraging initiative and finally, the need for long term effects.” (Lefever, 2008, 23)

As a result, the coherent implementation of these principles is perceived to be an essential condition for success in present as well as in past counterinsurgency campaigns:

“The key doctrinal principles of counterinsurgency still serve to clarify the limits and use of force in counterinsurgency, establish the relationship between political, civil and military and guide the military priorities. Their application can help to avoid the mistakes of the past.” (Briggs, 2010, 22)

The continuous relevance of “historically proven” British counterinsurgency principles is a constant theme with regards to reflections on historical lessons taken from historical experiences other than the Anglo-Afghan Wars. While many authors admit that British counterinsurgency practice cannot serve as a ready-made blueprint for the practice, through
comparing a number of COIN campaigns after World War II they seem to indeed recommend a universal recipe for success: only in those cases in which military practice and doctrinal theory – embodied in the “classical” principles of counterinsurgency – came to mirror each other, did operational success follow.

**Specific lessons from the use of Protected Communities and Indigenous Forces**

More specific lessons for the conduct of contemporary counterinsurgency campaigns are set forth by two pamphlets published in 2010 by the Land Warfare Centre. Both of them also adopt a comparative approach which allows them to identify elements of continuity across several historical campaigns, of British and foreign origin.

One pamphlet deals with lessons taken from the historical uses of Protected Communities, a term that refers to all efforts to physically separate population settlements from the insurgency movement, including the geographical “concentration and resettlement of the local population into villages behind a defendable perimeter.” (Land Warfare Development Group, 2010b, 1)

The pamphlet aims at identifying factors that were linked to the success during the Malaya campaign and to failure during the Vietnam campaign. The conclusion that is reached with this comparison is that, to be successful, Protected Communities must be integrated into a wider strategy of population control that tries to expand geographic ink spots of government controlled territory and to foster the effective protection of the settlements rather than the physical elimination of the insurgents. In other words,

> “the protected communities programme was an important element of both campaigns, but the difference between the two was that the British understood that the programme was a means to an end, and needed effective coordination, resourcing and protection, and provided it, whereas the South Vietnamese saw it as an end in itself and failed to provide effective coordination, resources or protection.” (Land Warfare Development Group, 2010b, 22)

Thus, the pamphlet suggests that the fundamental lesson for an implementation of Protected Communities in the contemporary environment is that these must be part of a wider counterinsurgency strategy that builds on the framework principles suggested by Thompson. The primary purpose of the communities should not be seen in the creation of “free fire zones” but in the genuine effort to separate and protect the population from the insurgency movement. This requires:
“That the people are seen as the battleground and that every effort is made by the Government to encourage their loyalty and isolate them from the insurgents. [...] That the programme is implemented with a genuine concern for the people. It must be properly resourced so that the new communities are seen as an improvement on the old way of life, the insurgents must not be allowed to get a foothold in the new communities and must be rooted out if they do, and the people must be effectively protected by a mixture of regular and militia forces.” (Land Warfare Development Group, 2010b, 22-23)

The second pamphlet, which provides lessons from other counterinsurgency campaigns, deals with the use of indigenous forces. Again, the pamphlet is written from a comparative perspective: ten case studies are analysed, ranging from successful British counterinsurgency campaigns in Malaya, Kenya, and Dhofar, to campaigns as different as the Vietnam War and the German anti-Partisan operations during the invasion of Russia.

As in the previous pamphlet, there is no specific reference to implications for the specific context contemporary of Afghanistan. However, the portrayed general lessons would have important implications for today's approach to training and employing Afghan Security Forces. Most importantly, one general lesson seems to be that indigenous forces (be they locally raised and regularly trained military forces, counter guerrilla units or community self-defence forces) can be used mainly to ensure that a closer connection between the population and the government is formed; in this function they can complement, however not completely replace, external forces during the on-going conduct of a counterinsurgency campaign:

“Indigenous Auxiliary Forces can act as a significant force multiplier, thus relieving regular forces for more mobile operations. [...] Indigenous forces should not be used as conventional soldiers. Their role should be as auxiliaries performing relatively static tasks to provide an interface to the population and free the regular forces for more complex mobile military operations.” (Land Warfare Development Group, 2010c, 50)

Thus, the value of indigenous forces should not be sought in their presumed but probably limited capability to fight a complex counterinsurgency on their own. Issues of training and education, but especially concerns regarding their loyalty to the government, suggest that their role should be restricted to the provision of trust and local security to the population of their home areas, thus indirectly contributing to the wider goal of separating the population from the insurgents:
“Indigenous Auxiliary Forces should be tribal and work only in their tribal area. [...] Recruiting sizeable loyal auxiliary forces from within the local populace is a significant step in isolating the insurgents from the local community, thus helping to prevent intimidation and isolate the insurgents from one of their methods of obtaining supplies.” (Land Warfare Development Group, 2010c, 50)

Conclusion

While there are individual nuances, the fundamental lessons that are suggested based on the analysis of post-World War II COIN campaigns can be described as follows: There is not a single campaign or a single strategic instrument than can be seamlessly re-applied to the current context. Rather, the coherent application of the ‘classical’ counterinsurgency principles, including a focus on protecting the population, winning their support, and separating them from the insurgents, is seen as the main condition of success.

Result of the analysis: A paradoxical lack of compatibility between historical lessons

Several observations can be made from this overview of how historical lessons are thought of and proposed for British operations in Afghanistan:

First, within the British Army, there seems to be no general consensus on the lessons that can be gleaned from the British imperial experience in Afghanistan. The sharply contrasting recommendations regarding which lessons ought to be taken from the Anglo-Afghan Wars demonstrate that there are various individual interpretations of the methods of imperial stabilisation and their effectiveness in gaining over control an inherently 'xenophobic' and 'warlike' Afghanistan. Aside from the widespread perception of a historically unchanging Afghan culture, which is founded on a warrior ethos, ruled by codes of tribal honour rather than legal texts, and inherently distrustful of both foreign interference and centralized government, there seems to be no general consensus on how to adapt to this cultural environment. For some, foreign presence in Afghanistan is creating in itself the conditions for the continuing instability and violence, and prospects of reversing this tendency from the outside are rather dim. For others, only a firm central government can overcome the inherent centrifugal tendencies of Afghan society, and this government cannot be built on the model of liberal democracy, but has to rely both on traditional structures and on credible capabilities of coercive force. Finally, a third stance points to the success that imperial influence and control other than the use of blunt force, embodied by the role of the Political Officer, seem to have
had. Here, the clever use of bribes, the acquisition of cultural empathy, but also the awareness of limits to political transformation from the outside represent features which can and should be rediscovered from the imperial past. The contradicting lessons from the Anglo-Afghan experience reappear partly even in the institutional lessons contained in the Land Warfare Centre pamphlet, which was published almost ten years after the start of the intervention. If this variety of positions can tell us anything, then it would be that there seems to be no consensual interpretation of the value of the Anglo-Afghan experience and which the resulting lessons for today are. Therefore, we can conclude that attempts to authoritatively forge common interpretations of Anglo-Afghan experience and its lessons for the conduct of contemporary operations must have either been missing or little effective.

Second, the other group of discussed lessons stem mainly from post-World War II counterinsurgency campaigns, with Malaya as the most often used, but by far not the only source of experience. Although the variety of these sources is far greater, the resulting lessons appear to be a lot more uniform. This may, in part, be due to the fact that most papers rely on a comparative approach to identify continuities across individual historical campaigns. Typically, authors would look for factors which would differentiate “successful” from “unsuccessful” campaigns. The consensual central lesson from such comparisons is that the thorough and complete implementation of the core counterinsurgency principles developed by Thompson is the condition sine qua non for operational success. This is confirmed by the institutional lessons found in the Land Warfare Centre pamphlets, despite their focus on individual instruments, which are seen to be effective only when inserted into a larger framework built on Thompson’s principles. Therefore, the thorough translation of these principles into a unified and coherent operational strategy is seen as the probably most important single lesson applicable to contemporary Afghanistan. Translating this lesson into practice means almost exclusively “getting the application of the principles right”, be this by achieving a stronger control and synchronization of civilian and military instruments, or by scaling back large-scale, kinetic military operations. In other words, learning from history is essentially considered to be about achieving better civil-military campaign management, and not about transferring isolated practices from one campaign to the other.

Third, what is generally lacking in all examined documents, however, are attempts to link lessons derived from the Anglo-Afghan experience with the operational application of the “classical” principles of British counterinsurgency doctrine. For example, there are no
meaningful arguments on the applicability of the classical principles of counterinsurgency doctrine in a context which is perceived as having been historically shaped by a culture of tribal revenge and rejection of centralized government. Under such circumstances, what are the implications for the application of individual principles, such as “winning the support of the population” or “neutralizing the insurgents”? How can the support of the population be won in a context that tends to interpret the presence of foreign forces as foreign interference and to reject the very institution of central government? Does this imply that military backing of Afghan government structures is necessary, essentially meaning that the insurgents’ military strength must be broken and the population forced into consent? Or rather that government trust must be built from the bottom up, relying on existing local structures of governance and using them to separate the population from the insurgents? Generally, no such questions have been asked. Thus, the two discussed main sources of historical lessons remain largely separated, and there is no attempt to integrate them into a coherent strategic proposition of the contemporary context of the ISAF mission.

From improvisation to guiding principles: a layered military culture

This section will attempt to make sense of this observed incompatibility. Why do contemporary actors, including the Land Warfare Development Group, have such apparent difficulty in suggesting lessons that unite common insights from relevant episodes of British colonial history and thus form some sort of informed and cohesive approach? After all, if assumptions about the cumulative learning processes in military organizations are correct, we would assume that this would be a relatively easy and consensual undertaking of updating the above mentioned “British” model of counterinsurgency with experience gathered in Afghanistan.

I claim that this observation can be understood by introducing the concept of “layered institutional culture”6. Schickler introduced the concept of layering in the context of the analysis of institutional change, thereby defining the process of layering as the addition

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6 I follow hereby Kier’s conceptualization of organizational culture, which she defines “as the set of basic
New arrangements on top of preexisting structures intended to serve different purposes. [...] While each individual change is consciously designed to serve specific goals, the layering of successive innovations results in institutions that appear more haphazard than the product of some overarching master plan.” (Schickler, 2001, 15)

The concept was then further developed especially by Thelen (2000, 2003). Layering, just like other phenomena of institutional change, occurs when “a gap exists between an institution’s intentions and its outcomes” (van der Heijden, 2011, 11). Thelen, however, emphasizes that the specific aspect of layering is the fact that because older institutional arrangements co-exist with (limited) institutional innovations, the outcome is not necessarily the objectively best-fitted for the current challenge (Thelen, 2003, 226-227). While this concept has been usefully applied in a number of case studies in the field of institutional change (for an overview, see van der Heijden, 2011), so far there seem to be no studies available that connect the core idea of “layering” to the study of the institutional culture of military organizations.

I suggest applying a new interpretation of the layering concept in order to explain the difficulties in extracting and integrating military lessons from different origins of historical experience. The resulting core argument can be sketched as follows:

First, the identities and perceptions of military organizations do not remain constant, but are subject to constant revision under the influence of new institutional challenges and experiences that are combined with existing ones. This is, in a nutshell, a characterization of the layering of (military) culture. Second, the extraction of lessons from specific instances of historical experience produces rather glimpses of actual configurations of cultural layers than “objectively” transferrable lessons to the present context. In other words, in studying past military experience, we can only “see” the past through the eyes of the military institution of that time – a condition which leads to inherent difficulties in combining lessons from different temporal and spatial contexts.

How can these relatively abstract arguments be applied to the examined case? I argue that as the military institution with the longest continuous history in the Western world, the British Army has indeed been subject to a layering process in its institutional culture in the period between the Victorian era and the Cold War era. This layering process can only be summarized

assumptions and values that shape shared understandings, and the forms or practices whereby these meanings are expressed, affirmed, and communicated to the members of an organization.” (Kier, 1995, 69-70)
here, but the following three elements are probably among the most relevant for this analysis: The professionalization of the officer corps; the increasing centralization of doctrine and education; the restructuring from a colonial army into an intervention army. As these institutional changes interacted with existing layers of institutional culture, changes in the use of military experience from colonial conflicts occurred that had lasting effects until today.

In the following, I will sketch the layering process that resulted in the diverging lessons from colonial conflicts before and after World War II.

**The institutional culture of the late Victorian Army: Decentralized improvisation**

In the 19th century, the British Army was far from being a homogenous organization; as a result of a lack of effective means of strategic communication, military strategy in the context of colonial conflicts was by necessity mainly driven by local commanders. These leaders relied on a combination of improvisation and local knowledge to a far greater extent that could be imaginable for any contemporary military organization. The British Army refrained from enforcing hierarchically centralized command and control and thus implicitly limited the effectiveness of any binding doctrine that could have been developed from the analysis of accumulated experience (Spiers, 1992, 289-290). Furthermore, although the Army was constantly conducting operations in the context of colonial deployments, “small wars’ were regarded as little more than an embarrassment or an aberration from training for conventional military operations” (Moreman, 1996, 125). The majority of officers seemed to hold a common perception that,

*“the Empire, although supported, was a somewhat transient interest, a distraction from normal business. By contrast, the flow of papers on technological change, the organisation of the armed forces, tactics, and other European nations reveals a more constant, steady interest in these subjects.”* (Adams, 1998, 60)

Recent scholarship has shown that the British officer class “did constitute a profession, albeit one whose intellectual horizons were, for the most part, confined to the regiment.” (French, 2005, 178) Thus, in the colonial context, the lack of centrally developed doctrine for colonial warfare was thus at least partly compensated by knowledge constructions and policy recommendations developed by local knowledge communities (Bayly, 2013). This tendency was further reinforced by the fact that colonial units were deployed to their garrisons on a permanent basis. As a consequence, the problems and achievements of the Anglo-Afghan Wars
were exclusively interpreted on the background of the local knowledge and the local perceptions. Understanding the specific ‘otherness’ of ‘the Afghans’ was the only imaginable inspiration for lessons – because there was no such thing as a common doctrine containing a ‘universal’ military approach for interventions and the handling of insurgencies. This view is consistent with the larger literature published on colonial wars during the late 19th and early 20th century: Most accounts focus on lessons tailored for specific contexts (a good example for the Afghan-Indian is Skeen (2009 (1932))); Callwell, the only major author presenting military lessons from a variety of colonial contexts, emphasizes that

“the conditions of small wars are so diversified, the enemy’s mode of fighting is often so peculiar, and the theatres of operations present such singular features, that irregular warfare [...] must be modified to suit the circumstances of each particular case.” (Callwell, 1906 (1899), 23)

As a result, for British officers of the Victorian era, qualities such as improvisation and individual initiative were an essential part of their identity. Still in 1910, a training memorandum expresses the importance of such a ‘spirit of initiative’ by stating that “success depends not so much on the inherent soundness of a principle or plan of operations as on the method of application of the principle and the resolution with which the plan is carried out.” (quoted in Spiers, 2006, 31) This, in turn, hindered the emergence of a professional body of abstract knowledge derived from the experience of colonial warfare. On the contrary,

“those assigned to colonial garrisons, the chief occupation of half the Army, relied on practical rules of thumb rather than intellect to solve recurrent problems. [...] Military theory, which should have been the basis for military decision making, related only to techniques of drills, rituals, and ceremonies that allegedly supported the development of such characteristics as steadiness on parade which were regarded as the big tests of soldierly qualities.” (Preston, 1980, 9)

**The layering process induced by World War II**

World War II marks the beginning a major layering process relevant for this analysis. In an attempt to overcome the inherent resistance to hierarchically defined doctrine, the British General Staff endeavoured to develop and transmit a centrally developed doctrine for “operations in which all arms combined to achieve surprise, coupled with a minimum of manpower and a maximum of mechanically generated firepower.” (French, 2006, 39-40)
However, even under the imminent threat of a war against a heavily rearming Germany, the pre-existing institutional culture, shaped by the requirements of colonial warfare, effectively contributed to limit efforts of doctrinal centralisation to the mere diffusion of loose principles that lacked specific rules of application on the operational level: “to have gone further [...] would have run the risk that parts of the widely scattered army would have prepared for the wrong kind of operations.” (French, 2006, 40)

Lacking central doctrinal guidance beyond a set of malleable operational principles, “senior officers, guided by their trained judgement and long experience, [had] to determine for themselves how to apply them.” (French, 2006, 40) This enabled, however, that officer values, such as a improvisation skills and individual judgment, could endure even the vast mobilisation and industrialisation efforts that the British Army faced during World War II. Consequently, attempts to write official histories of past conflicts were restricted to the analysis of conventional interstate wars such as the World Wars, the Korean War, and the Falklands Campaign, while official histories of colonial counterinsurgency campaigns such as Malaya, Kenya, or Aden have never been written (Latawski, 2011). Similarly, while efforts were made to teach staff officer candidates the nuts and bolts of high-intensity armoured warfare as well as nuclear operations, education in the conduct of counterinsurgency operations remained neglected (French, 2012, 66).

As a result, “the British Army in the second half of the 20th century virtually consisted of two very distinct conceptual camps with their particular organisational subcultures: one skilled in expeditionary ‘small wars’ [...] and another skilled in armoured warfare” (Mäder, 2004, 83). Therefore, was the effort to promote centralised doctrine and a professionalised military identity confined to the barracks in the North German plains, where the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) prepared for countering a Soviet armoured offensive? Not entirely. The institutional changes introduced during and after World War II did change the way the British Army fought small wars, and as a result also its perception of these conflicts.

Partly as a result of the perceived delayed mobilisation for war against Germany in 1940, the British Army kept national serve in place in the period after 1945. The constant supply of recruits was destined to fill the ranks of the BAOR, but also to serve in those colonial possessions areas where communist uprisings were looming at the horizon (French, 2012, 54). Although national service was abolished in 1960, the manpower required to entertain the
BAOR as well as the military presence in the remaining colonies meant that the pre-war force posture based on regiments permanently deployed in remote colonial garrisons could not be maintained. Instead, the military leadership created strategic reserve forces, which were to be sent overseas whenever actual conflicts arose. In practice, however, this meant that these forces were being rotated on short-notice to various conflict zones located in vastly different geographic and political contexts.

“By September 1963, of the 171,000 regulars then serving, 80,000 men were stationed in Britain and 51,000 were in West Germany. Only 6,000 soldiers were in Aden and 14,000 in the Far East.” (French, 2011, 34) Thus, when insurgencies developed, individual units were shipped from one deployment to the other, having sometimes only weeks to get accustomed to a new terrain. Commanders did simply not have the time to develop that sort of local “cultural awareness” that would have enabled them to develop what Callwell called an approach tailored to “the circumstances of each particular case”. As a result,

“In 1958 almost the whole of the Strategic Reserve was committed overseas, to Kenya, Aden, Cyprus, and Jordan, often on the kind of operations for which it was neither prepared nor trained. Units that had expected to be given three months of specialized training before being sent abroad were dispatched at three days’ notice. Soldiers were cross-posted between units to bring units up to their proper manpower establishment, and so found themselves amongst strangers. One brigade sent to Cyprus had not done any company training for over a year. Another brigade was broken up and its battalions placed under different brigade commanders, and much of their hurriedly issued mechanical transport broke down.” (French, 2011, 35)

This had two important consequences: First, to ensure that drills and specific capabilities would not be lost from one deployed unit to the next, the Army started to institutionalise and codify counterinsurgency warfare, the manual “The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya” (ATOM) being one of the most prominent examples. Those requirements changed dramatically the perception of how appropriate strategies for local counter-insurgencies were to be developed. Increasingly, doctrine writers, but also commanders as well as influential civilian officials sought to link operational success to the application of abstract, universally principles⁷. For sure, these had to be adapted to the local context at hand, but at least during

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⁷ Those principles were essentially those presented in the discussion above, “including identification of the essentially political nature of the problem, the primacy of civil control, the coordination of civil and military activity, the emphasis on intelligence, the separation of the insurgent from the mass of the people, the battle to
the Malaya campaign, the priority of the strategic debate shifted towards “getting the principles right” – instead of “understanding the local context”. The ATOM manual can be seen as an illustration of this change of perception: Gen Templer, as British High Commissioner in Malaya the de facto ruler of Malaya between 1952 and 1954, ordered the writing of the manual in a reaction to the vastly differing military approaches practiced by individual battalions under his command (Marston, 2006, 103). Because it contained generalised lessons on common themes that could easily be re-applied in other contexts, “ATOM served as [well after Malaya] as a basic introduction to counter-insurgency strategy, and its structure would serve as a template for armies around the world to follow for the next twenty-five years.” (Marston, 2006, 106)

Therefore, although Thompson is often mentioned as the most essential contributor to British COIN thinking, he did not re-invent the wheel of counterinsurgency. Instead, he can be seen as he “codified, popularized, and brought to a wider audience doctrines that the army had already developed and promulgated in its own manuals some years earlier.” (French, 2011, 207)

The second consequence, however, is directly linked to the theoretical argument of the layering effects of institutional culture. Despite the new necessity to identify transferrable lessons for an army that was hastily shipping poorly trained units from one ‘emergency’ to the next, the new focus on developing doctrinal principles did not replace entirely the previously dominating institutional culture of decentralised improvisation. Rather, as a result of layering, a highly flexible, largely informal and unbinding understanding of counterinsurgency doctrine emerged, which proved largely compatible with established notions of improvisation and individual initiative. In practice, this meant that local commanders still enjoyed a fairly large amount of operational decision-making autonomy and thus could continue to make strategy based on ad-hoc assessments rather than faithful adherence to counterinsurgency doctrine (Sheffield, 2010, E-7). The contents of the principles were so open to individual interpretation that local commanders could justify the use of “exemplary force [...] mass arrests and wholesale detention without trial, deportations, forcible population resettlement, and, at their most extreme, the creation of free-fire zones.” (French, 2012, 113-114). In a detailed analysis, Bennett has shown that doctrinal principles even enabled systematic torture and mass killings within the context of the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya “as soldiers thought the situation win 'hearts and minds', appropriate and proportionate military response and political reform to prevent a resurgence of the problem.” (Sheffield, 2010, E-6) One paradigmatic example for such is the book ‘Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam’, written in 1966 by Sir Robert Thompson, and based on a comparative analysis of the counterinsurgency campaigns in Malaya and Vietnam.
demanded a great deal of force, and commanders were permitted to reach their own interpretations of the concept.” (Bennett, 2007, 657)

**Conclusion**

In sum, while the practice of British commanders to improvise locally tailored – and often brutal – strategies may not have changed, the small wars experience after World War II was perceived differently through the layering effects of centralisation and professionalisation. Colonial warfare was no longer seen as requiring exclusively locally developed strategies, dealing with the specific requirements of the local context. Instead, lacking true familiarity with the local context as commanders moved from one campaign theatre to the next, the British Army perceived the teaching and application of a common set of guiding principles as key to success. The institutional culture of the British Army therefore changed to the extent that “the army did try hard to gather, analyse, and disseminate operational and tactical lessons.” (French, 2011, 213) The Malaya campaign emblematic in this respect because it was the theatre where the importance of mainstreaming common doctrinal principles for counterinsurgency was recognized and implemented. As a result, Malaya was regarded as an instructive experience in the following decades, even to the point that the “fixation with the ‘Malayan’ model of counter-insurgency […] continued to dominate much debate concerning Northern Ireland” (Benest, 2006, 139): Still in 1993, staff officers would draw comparisons between Northern Ireland and Malaya and recommend applicable lessons (Benest, 2006, 139).

By and large, however, these principles did not mean a hierarchical limitation of strategic choices; rather, they provided a different justification for specific strategic choices made by local commanders. The interaction with the pre-existing institutional culture highlighting improvisation on the ground made sure any more formalised doctrine was still seen as a threat to the needs for flexible leadership and quick adaptability. As a result, the interaction between the new layer of emphasis on doctrinal education and the existing cultural layer of improvisation produced

“powerful countervailing forces that impeded collective learning, not least […] the latitude given to battalion commanders to run their units as they saw fit. Although the army attempted to be a learning organization, its structure meant that some units learned more than others, and that the army as a whole was also good at forgetting.” (French, 2011, 213)
The effects of layered military culture: The use of historical buzz-words during the opening stage of the Helmand campaign, 2006-2007

How did the thus characterized layered institutional culture of the British Army influence the use of historical experience in operational practice? Can we detect any practical impact of the lessons that were discussed among officers, as analysed in the first part of this text? The answer is complex and can only be sketched here. However, the observed use does provide a good illustrative of the explanatory value of the layering concept.

References to Malaya played a central in designing the operational plan for the initial deployment of British troops to the South Afghan province of Helmand in summer 2006. The British general Roberts, at that time ISAF commander, thus recalled in an interview that “what Templer did in Malaya was a big factor in my own thinking” (Cobbold, 2007, 26). He further claimed that

“we decided to create a version of the ‘Malayan Ink Spot Strategy’ [...] whereby we ensured a good level of persistent security in specified areas in which the government (GOA) and the International Community could deliver the reconstruction and development that the Afghan people deserve” (quoted in Cobbold, 2007, 28).

Likewise, 16 Air Assault Brigade, earmarked for the first tour to Helmand, “organized a series of study days that focused on the British experience of counter-insurgency in Malaya.” (Chin, 2007, 203) Prior to the deployment of the brigade, a reconnaissance mission was termed “Operation Malaya” (Fergusson, 2009, 202). According to a former intelligence officer with deployment experience in Afghanistan, references to Malaya appear to have been so frequent that,

“no visitor to military headquarters in Iraq or, especially, Afghanistan could miss the almost compulsory mentions in presentations to guests (and indeed serving soldiers) of this jungle war [...] by British army officers, seeking through PowerPoint presentations to explain what they were doing” (Ledwidge, 2011, 154).

Despite this omnipresence, there are many indications that the Malaya experience served more as a rhetorical repertoire than as a binding theoretical model that had to be faithfully applied. Malaya was so widely known as a paradigmatic success case that there was no debate on its relevance or, indeed, what specific elements of the Malaya approach were transferrable. Thus,
a former government official who was member of the Post Conflict Reconstruction Unit (PCRU) in 2006 stated that a thorough analysis of historical campaigns, including the campaign of Malaya, did not occur during the planning process; historical references, including references to ink-spots, were used mainly as ‘buzz-words’ without a thorough reflection on their actual context (Interview with Mr Korski). At best, as one interviewee of the Stabilisation Unit – as the PCRU came to be called – confirmed, there were “echoes” from Malaya, general rhetorical references, which however were not a result of a critical analysis (Interview with UK MoD official). A similar view is voiced by field commanders deployed to Helmand who state that “the Malaya model wasn’t an official strategy […] but ‘inkspots’ certainly became a term of reference among ourselves when we were out there.” (Fergusson, 2009, 202) Due to a lack of counterinsurgency education, even the ‘universal principles’ that can be seen, as argued, as the basic intellectual heritage of Malaya, appear to have been neglected. Still in 2009, “two-thirds of officers that each had completed an average of two operational deployments had no knowledge of fundamental counterinsurgency principles.” (Harvey & Wilkinson, 2009, 29)

As already mentioned, until 2010 the British military leadership did not provide concrete lessons from Afghan history and its implications for the use of force in the present context. While the Taliban leadership used the experience of the First Anglo-Afghan War to portray their insurgency as part of a 160-year old struggle for independence from British rule (Loyn, 2009, 296), “the British had forgotten […] they would not be more welcome here [in Helmand] than if they had returned in force to the west of Ireland in the 1950s, proclaiming peace.” (Ledwidge, 2011, 64) Lacking clear operational guidelines regarding which lessons from Malaya were indeed applicable, in 2006 ground commanders had the impression that there simply was no authoritative, binding strategic narrative. An officer thus recalled that

“We didn’t really have assumptions, we didn’t know what we were taking over, we didn’t really know what we were gonna be doing or how we were gonna do it. We just knew that we were there to support the Afghan Government and to try to encourage development and stabilisation.” (Interview with Cpt X)

In the absence of strong institutionalised lessons, the British military approach in Helmand came to be shaped by the underlying layer of institutional culture – that is the reliance on

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8 An operational planning cell uniting officials of the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence, and the Department for International Development. The PCRU was tasked by the UK government to develop the ‘UK Joint Plan for Helmand’, an integrated civil-military operational plan, prior to the deployment (Farrell & Gordon, 2009, 669).
Improvisation and ground initiative. Still in 2006, British officers describe this culture as one that “often expects commanders at all levels to make full use of the latitude given them, something often assumed absent in other armed forces” (Little, 2009, 13).

There is a number of operational decisions that can illustrate the results of an institutional culture placing emphasis on improvising in new contexts, rather than applying existing doctrine by the book or expecting directives from the higher chain of command. The most prominent example is the decision not to stick to the original operational plan that had been developed by the PCRU. Responding to an emergency call by the Afghan province governor, the British commander of Task Force Helmand took the initiative to re-deploy the available forces in relatively isolated ‘platoon houses’ (King, 2010, 315). While this move was justified by the need to defend Afghan government institutions threatened by insurgent attacks, it stretched British forces too allow for any meaningful ink-spots to grow. Although the decision itself attracted criticism within the British Army, Chief of Defence Staff Air Marshal Stirrup later justified such an extent of decision-making autonomy of an operational commander:

“any such significant shift in tactic would, as is always the case, be reported to London, not—I must add—so that London can control the tactics in theatre, which would be entirely wrong; no matter what goes on in theatre and no matter what criticisms people might have of it, I can pretty much guarantee that London would always do it worst.” (quoted in House of Commons, 2011, EV 136)

In their attempts to put the results of this improvised decision on a more sustainable basis, subsequent operational commanders made use of their autonomy as well. This led, in practice, to a reliance on the individual war-fighting styles of the deployed units, and each brigade commander’s willingness to prove his ability to take operational initiative. Thus, during subsequent tours of the Helmand campaign, operational strategy seemed to be driven primarily by a

“desire for intense tactical activity on the part of commanders. Because a brigade and its commander have only six months in which to put their mark on the campaign (and earn promotion and medals), there seems a predilection for engaging with the enemy [...]. Commanders can show their initiative by staging a number of military operations, whose importance is most clearly designated by the severity of the firefights.” (King, 2010, 325)
This preference for kinetic military action did not happen out of a conscious decision to ignore the principles of counterinsurgency that seemed to have enabled the success of the Malaya campaign. However, these principles mainly served to legitimize a military approach with a tendency to seek short-term kinetic results, in an effort that can be termed “a martial version of the ‘culture of spin’ that dominated Whitehall during the New Labour period.” (Ledwidge, 2011, 86) For example, the principle of winning ‘hearts and minds’ of the local population as a means to separate them from the insurgency movement was, for example, used to justify reluctance to engage into aggressive anti-drug operations in Helmand (Dixon, 2009, 375). The same principle was invoked to criticize of civilian agencies for their lacking capacity to deliver development projects to zones occupied by the British Army (Tootal, 2010, 282). On numerous occasions British operational commanders even legitimised their preference for a military confrontation with the Taliban by referring to this very principle: The offensive use of firepower against insurgents was intended to “to show the Taliban that the Royal Marines had the power to hit them hard, and to demonstrate – not only to them but also to any civilians that might be in the area – that the marines meant business.” (Southby-Tailyour, 2008, 157)

As a result, thanks to the idea that winning hearts and minds could be achieved through offensive kinetic action, a focus on tactical improvisation and unpredictability was seen to be entirely compatible with the established framework of counterinsurgency principles. Thus, it can be argued that the superficial use of historical lessons during the initial period of the Helmand campaign is a result of a layered institutional culture. While Malaya and the generalized, highly ambiguous doctrinal principles associated with this experience were frequently used as a rhetorical lip-service, this did not replace the more ancient layer of operational improvisation and initiative by field commanders.

**Conclusion**

As a result, the available knowledge that was produced as a result from the discussed experiences was very different. The defeats in the Anglo-Afghan Wars, but also the relative successes of British tribal engagements, appear above all to be a result of the specific nature of Afghan society – a degree of ‘otherness’ that appears to require a military approach tailored to these specificities, perhaps even to an extent that would contradict contemporary doctrinal concepts. On the other hand, the post-World War II experiences seem to suggest that each local context is essentially manageable – provided that strategists thoroughly apply and adapt the
'universal' counterinsurgency principles that were invented in the process of the professionalization of the British Army.

In sum, when attempting to learn lessons from historical experience, it appears to be necessary to reject the idea that experience produces a cumulative, cohesive body of lessons. Instead, as military organizations change over time, they change the ways they learn from their experiences. The concept of layered institutional culture helps to make sense of the greatly diverging lessons that military institutions produce from experiences differing in time: a specific lesson reflects the unique combination of institutional layers that framed the perception of a new experience at a given historical period. The layering process therefore produces unique sets of knowledge and ideas which – as can be observed for the British Army of 2010 – are very difficult to reconcile, let alone to integrate and to apply in operational practice.

This text has attempted to perform two tasks at the same time: First, it aimed at providing an exploratory assessment on the ways contemporary military organizations use historical experience, and if prior experience could enable some sort of cumulative learning effect, as suggested by parts of the available literature. Second, it suggested an analytical framework that helps to understand the specific ways military organizations have made of their experiences over time. The concept of layered institutional culture provides a fruitful analytical lens to make sense of the complex interaction of military lessons shaped by evolving institutional conditions.

A thorough conduct of an analysis along these would require more systematic empirical research: do military organizations produce today similar lessons from individual experiences as they did earlier? Can historical evolutions in the institutional collection and dissemination of doctrinal lessons be traced more closely? And to what extent do military organizations with different layers of institutional culture differ really in the use of lessons from the past? Some studies have produced evidence that armies with a limited tradition of colonial deployment, such as the German Army, tend to see history in a stricter sense as a source of authoritative doctrine (Cox, 1992; Sangar, 2013; Sinnreich, 2006). However, the available studies are largely qualitative and lack a reliable, cross-national operationalization that remains still to be found.

9 Of course, institutional culture is by far not the only factor influencing the application of historical lessons in operational strategy. Other factors such as material conditions, bureaucratic settings, civil-military relations, and last but not least the behaviour of the enemy may have an even greater impact. However, it can help to make sense of variations that occur between the approaches of armies confronted with similar operational challenges.
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