



Using Historical Experience:

The British Army and the Bundeswehr in Afghanistan

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Abstract: This PhD explores some of the ways in which the British and German Armies have used historical experience in their process of operational adaptation in Afghanistan. Historical experience is conceptualized as a body of useful knowledge that is constructed through the institutional analyses of past military campaigns with the aim of producing normative lessons for military operations in the present. Empirically, the research shows that for both armies, the use of historical references played a limited role during the preparation of initial deployment for the ISAF mission. However, having become aware of a lack of operational coherence on the ground in Helmand, the British Army “rediscovered” the importance of applying fundamental counterinsurgency principles that were identified with a comparative analysis of colonial counterinsurgency campaigns. This process has contributed to improve officers’ consensual understanding of doctrine on the part of the officers as well as to make the British military approach in Afghanistan more coherently focused on protecting the population rather than pursuing a predominantly kinetic confrontation with the insurgency movement.

With regards to the Bundeswehr, a thorough discussion of the historical experiences that have potential utility for military operations in Afghanistan has been largely absent. Initially, the German military approach was dominated primarily by an unconscious reliance on the operational design used in the Balkans. The operational reaction to the escalating violence in the Kunduz area has primarily consisted in a hesitant introduction of kinetic means, while existing deficits in non-kinetic military activities have largely been ignored. Similarly, operational debate among Bundeswehr officers has been focused on the necessity to perform in combat; implications of counterinsurgency operations for non-kinetic military tasks, such as the support of the local population, have received only marginal attention. I argue that this tendency could have been limited has an internal debate taken place on the historical lessons that incorporate the concepts used in contemporary Anglo-Saxon counterinsurgency. In sum, three primary findings of this research may be recapitulated as follows: First, the mere existence of a rich institutional past of colonial operations does not necessarily equate with superior knowledge in contemporary operations. Historical experience must be actively transmitted, analysed and institutionalised in order to have such an effect. Second, the ways in which military organizations use experience from the past are shaped by institutional traditions that have evolved over time. Third,

despite the danger of dysfunctional historical analogies, the institutional discussion of historical lessons can prove to be useful for present operations – especially if consistency is promoted through consensually applied, ‘enduring’ principles of doctrine.



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Bio: Eric Sangar completed his undergraduate studies in Political Science, Philosophy, and Public Law at the University of Heidelberg in 2005, followed by a Master in International Security at Sciences Po Paris in 2008. During his studies, Eric collected research experience at the Chair of International Relations of the Institute of Political Science of the University of Heidelberg, at the Heidelberg Institute of Conflict Research, and at the Security Studies Center of the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri).

After his Master graduation, he began his PhD at the European University Institute in Florence. In his doctoral project, he explored the ways in which the British Army and the German Bundeswehr used historical experience as a source of lessons for the making of operational strategy within the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. For this research, he collected extensive empirical material in the military establishments of Germany and the UK and conducted a number of qualitative interviews with military officers, government officials, and policy experts.

Besides the making contemporary stabilisation strategy, Eric is as well interested in issues such as post-conflict Security Sector Reform, European military integration, and the analysis of conflict in the Middle East.