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BOOK REVIEWS

Insurgency and Counterinsurgency. A Global History, by Jeremy Black. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, pp. 1-370

Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies. National Styles and Strategic Cultures, by Beatrice Heuser & Eitan Shamir (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 1-240

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Two recent books, Jeremy Black's *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: A Global History*, and Beatrice Heuser and Eitan Shamir's edited volume *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies: National Styles and Strategic Cultures* challenge the assumption that emerged in the post-Cold War literature that war 'has shifted into a new paradigm' (Smith 2005, p.2). The books encourage the reader to consider that insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN) are far from being modern phenomena. Irregular forms of warfare have existed in various guises for millennia and a more nuanced understanding of global approaches to both insurgency and COIN is crucial to 'the learning of lessons.' (Black 2016, p. x)

Black offers an all-encompassing account of humanity's experience of insurgency and COIN from antiquity to present moving, in just 240 pages, from the Third Servile War (73-71 BCE) to modern interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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As the title of the book suggests, he attempts to avoid viewing the subject merely through a Western lens, opting to explore insurgency from a global perspective. His analysis includes case studies from Africa, Latin America, Russia, the Middle East and China which he lays out chronologically to capture the role of specific events in framing political and public opinion. His overarching objective is to re-define how we view insurgency as a concept; not as a modern phenomenon, but as an enduring, inchoate feature of mankind's military experience.

By contrast, Heuser and Shamir's edited volume is a collection of articles by several prominent scholars dedicated to examining whether states and non-state actors exhibit an identifiable 'pattern of fighting' when conducting either insurgencies or COIN operations. It notes that both insurgents and polities display a degree of intransigence in their martial approaches that contradicts the assumption that COIN should be iterative (i.e., a constant process of drawing lessons from one's own, and others', successes and failures). It asks two main questions: first, whether these patterns are a function of static constants such as geography or climate, or else due to culturally-received habits, expectations, and preferences for the use of force informed by positive, or negative, interpretations of historical experience. And second, whether these geographical and/or cultural bounds limit the extent to which lessons about the successful conduct of insurgency and COIN can be learned.

The two books tackle the subject matter from contrasting perspectives, with clear differences in their respective structures, methodologies, and intended audiences. While Heuser and Shamir are writing for policy makers and academics, Black targets a more general audience; his broader approach epitomised by his use of the Oxford dictionary's definition of insurgency: 'rising in open resistance to established authority.' He concedes that this definition may 'surprise and even irritate,'

but argues overly narrow definitions have skewed public understanding of a concept that often defies categorisation. Consequently, this has led to some entrenched, ahistorical assumptions about insurgency warfare.

Black's book often sacrifices more nuanced analysis in favour of drawing out thematic points such as the role of religion or insurgency's inexorable connection with politics. He discusses both these points in an interesting chapter on the nexus between religion and power in 1500-1700, before moving on to the 'reactionary' insurgencies of the eighteenth century, the large-scale insurgencies of the nineteenth century (where insurgency and COIN was 'as much an essential part of warfare as traditional, conventional warfare.' (p.116) and into the varied and complex campaigns of the twentieth century.

The chapter *Interventionism and its Failings, 2000s* brings Black's argument full circle by discussing how modern interventions encouraged the idea that a reconceptualization of war was necessary. He traces back the key doctrine on COIN that emerged at the beginning of the decade, leveraging on cultural anthropologist Montgomery McFate's belief that 'cultural knowledge' was the key to victory. However, overall the chapter adds little in the way of new evidence for the failings of US-led campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Black's final chapter, *Speculations about the Future*, is an engaging summary of his argument. He notes that from 1990 to 2007, 220,000 people died in inter-state conflicts, while 3.6 million were killed in intra-state conflicts. The author speculates that intra-state conflicts will increasingly be characterised by clashes in urban environments; criminal activity and insurgency will be increasingly intertwined, while religious fundamentalism will continue to dominate global insurgency movements. Black contends that while the historical context and means used in insurgencies dif-

fers across time, the political dimension of insurgency has been, and always will be, inseparable from the military.

Heuser and Shamir's topic is equally complex and broad, but the book benefits from its clear structure. It is divided into three sections: Part I, 'COIN Strategies,' features seven articles examining the approaches of polities. A highlight is Robert Egnell and David Ucko's contribution (Chapter 2, pp.25-46), which dissects the myth of an enduring COIN tradition in Britain through an examination of campaigns post-1945. They find Britain's assumption of an inherent ability to wage COIN warfare had little historical merit, leaving them underprepared for the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Part II examines 'Insurgency Strategies' in Algeria, Ireland, Palestine, and Afghanistan and finds that discernible strategic cultures are identifiable in non-state actors' methods. For example, Rob Johnson's chapter explores the Taliban's fighting style (Chapter 12, pp.246-265). He finds they are a hybrid organisation that blends old Afghan approaches to conflict with steadfast Islamic beliefs, opportunism, and a distinctive geographical environment. Part III connects the dots between insurgency and COIN through an 'instrumentarium' of strategic measures with political, social and economic dimensions that have been identified as being used by insurgents and counterinsurgents across time. The taxonomy of strategic measures is divided into two groups: first, the violent means, including brutal large-scale repression, 'scorched earth' tactics, targeted assassinations, ethnic cleansing, and quadrillage. Second, the benign tools, for example deposing a government, installing a new government, economic aid, school/hospital construction, propaganda, and promoting religious/cultural freedom.

The aim is to ascertain whether these tools are specific to particular countries/groups or whether the use of, for example, large-scale repression, is a generalizable trend across all insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. They find that the

tools employed are broadly consistent across time and common to both movements. Thus, 'a simple national tradition' of either insurgency or COIN is a fallacy; instead, actors have 'drawn on a mix of instruments' (p.364). This provides an interesting alternative to David Kilcullen's idea that '[t]here is no standard set of metrics, benchmarks, or operational techniques that apply to all insurgencies ...' (Kilcullen 2009, p. 183).

Both books effectively cover non-Western operations, making the valid point that, despite their long history of fighting insurgencies, Russia and China are often overlooked. On China, Black's argues that their perception of insurgency as 'internal war' (*Nei Zhan*) contrasts with the Western view that COIN is conducted overseas. Thus, China's experiences have 'limited relevance' for Europe (p.236). Heuser and Shamir's volume contains two excellent contributions by Stephen Blank and Yiyzhak Shichor, respectively. Blank's analysis of Russian COIN campaigns finds 'constant operating factors' and an ability to learn from their own, and Western, failures (Chapter 4, pp.75-94). Shichor then walks us through insurgency and COIN in modern China arguing that their historical experience with dangerous insurgencies makes the state more prone to heavy-handed crackdowns. He concludes that the administration tends to react proportionately to *potential* rather than *actual* threats. (Chapter 5, pp.95-112)

In summary, Black's is an accessibly-written and interesting read, but the analysis is often too cursory. This is particularly the case in chapter nine (*The Variety of Goals and Means, 1980s*), where Black dedicates just nine pages to a decade of insurgency with just one paragraph of twelve lines on Africa. This is despite the plethora of examples of insurgency across the African continent in the 1980s. While it would be impossible to cover every global insurgency in great detail, the book would certainly have benefitted from being at least twice the length.

Heuser and Shamir's volume is thoughtful, well-structured and successfully tackles a complex subject. The breadth of cases that are covered are tied together effectively by the thematic thread of national styles and strategic cultures. It is a call to scholars and policy makers alike to consider that trends in warfare can change rapidly and that the effective consideration of the strategic environment coupled with an ability to learn from past mistakes are often the decisive factors in conflict.

Both books effectively address the danger of reductionist thinking that has emanated from protracted and largely unsuccessful US-led campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. The authors demonstrate, by virtue of their divergent approaches to a similar subject, the complexity of insurgency and COIN. Both warn the reader that correlation is not causation and just because a trend has been identified, does not mean the future is any easier to predict. Instead, to quote Black's final point, insurgency and COIN deserves study 'without political blinkers, national prejudices, or conceptual and historiographical confusion.' (p. 240)

References

Kilcullen, D 2009, *The Accidental Guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Smith, R 2005, *The Utility of Force, The Art of War in the Modern World*, Penguin Books, London.

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