

## Counterinsurgency in Crisis: Britain and the Challenges of Modern Warfare

By David H. Ucko and Robert Egnell  
Columbia University Press, 2013  
250 pp. \$26.00  
ISBN: 978-0231164269

Reviewed by F.G. Hoffman

Writing in his seminal *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency*, David French concluded that the United Kingdom had created a “chequered history of gathering, analyzing, and disseminating the lessons” from its irregular campaigns. This conclusion contrasts with Dr. John Nagl’s case study of Britain’s superior organizational learning in Malaya in his *Eating Soup with a Knife*. Both books focused on Britain’s imperial past. More recently, veterans from the United Kingdom’s campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have sided with French, stating that “despite our institutional [counterinsurgency] heritage,” the study of small wars “[has been] relegated to a position of almost complete institutional irrelevance.”<sup>1</sup> This is now reinforced by a new assessment of British operations, *Counterinsurgency*

*in Crisis*, which argues that Her Majesty’s armed forces overestimated the relevance of their past imperial policing to contemporary challenges.

If you want to read a sentimental regimental history of valor and glory in Iraq and Afghanistan, you will want to pass on this book. *Counterinsurgency in Crisis* is not draped in mythology; it is a sober, dispassionate, and objectively critical evaluation of British strategic performance. Both authors have stellar scholarly credentials and excellent prior works on counterinsurgency. Dr. David Ucko teaches at the College of International Security Affairs, a component at the National Defense University. His Swedish writing partner, Dr. Robert Egnell, was a visiting professor at Georgetown University. Together they have produced a scathing indictment of British preparation, strategic direction, and operational practice in contemporary conflict. Their brutal bottom line: “There is no fig leaf large enough here to cover the deep flaws in the British government’s own approach and conduct in their counterinsurgency campaigns.”

The United Kingdom’s poor showing in Iraq and Afghanistan is multidimensional. One shortfall identified by the authors was the existence of a smug perception that British forces were uniquely qualified in counterinsurgency because of the United Kingdom’s extensive experience in Africa and the Middle East, peace support tasks in the Balkans, and of course, Northern Ireland. Much of that experience was dated and certainly not well represented in British doctrine or military education. Ucko and Egnell found that this unique heritage retarded learning and adaptation, further degrading performance.

The authors’ transition to an assessment of the strategic level does not improve their view of British counterinsurgency efforts. While strategy requires a clear alignment of ends, ways, and means, “strategy making for Bara and for Helmand was marked by the failure to grasp the nature of the campaign, to adapt once new realities came to the fore, and to resource these efforts, both politically and financially, to achieve a

clearly established objective.” Some may suggest that counterinsurgency doctrine was flawed or, as the title of the book suggests, a concept in crisis. But the real problem was simply too little strategic thinking and too few forces, something the authors document depressingly well. The principal challenge, however, was shortfalls in strategic thinking. As Ucko and Egnell observe, “the British capacity for strategic thinking—its ability to formulate a campaign plan—has proved consistently and fatefully problematic throughout the last decade of operations.”

This will not be news to informed students of British security matters. British generals, including Lieutenant General Paul Newton, who now heads the Center for Strategy and Security at Exeter University, have argued quite openly that the strategy flame is unlit in London. Former Chief of the Defence Staff Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup decried the loss of “an institutional capacity for and culture of strategic thought.”<sup>2</sup> After considering the past decade, looking at the prospects of a security environment laced with instability and complex contingencies similar to the last decade, Ucko and Egnell conclude their book with an ominous assessment of current British capability.

The United Kingdom entered two wars with an overestimation of its grasp of contemporary conflict, inadequate machinery and poor practice at linking its objectives to a sound strategy, and a military culture that was short on education but long on improvisation and “cracking on.”<sup>3</sup> Doctrine was lacking, but counterinsurgency theory cannot be a panacea for so many structural, educational, and cultural gaps. Nor can shortfalls in our understanding of contemporary insurgency be employed as an excuse to shelter less than stellar strategic competence in London (or Washington for that matter).

Ucko and Egnell do not believe that the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defence has fully grasped the formidable tasks inherent to modern warfare, nor has it adapted sufficiently for stabilization missions. They find it clear that civilian elites are not embracing the necessary

changes in government to support even a respectable role for the country in the most likely of scenarios.

What makes Ucko and Egnell's work unique and invaluable is its take on future missions and its evaluation of options for British policy planners. Given the reduced resources and the experiences of the last decade, they concisely examine the merits of scaling down British contributions to niche investments, employment of more indirect approaches, and greater burden-sharing with regional organizations. The authors are doubtful that these approaches will meet British political objectives, noting that "strategic abstinence and 'strategic selectivity' are options fraught with a different type of risk, particularly for a state with global expeditionary ambitions or when alliance commitments come into play." Given the U.S. ambitions and its role in the world, American strategists should take serious note of Ucko and Egnell's conclusions.

This is a serious and objective scholarly analysis of British strategic and operational performance. The United States needs a similar assessment, as its leaders and key decisionmakers have been less willing to come to grips with its own shortfalls in the council chambers of government. Hopefully, someone in the United States will take up the challenge of writing a similar book about U.S. strategic performance.

Because of its objective analysis and solid scholarship, *Counterinsurgency in Crisis* is recommended to professionals in the transatlantic community interested in strategic studies, civil-military relations, military history, and contemporary conflict. JFQ

---

Dr. F.G. Hoffman is a Senior Research Fellow in the Center for Strategic Research, Institute for National Strategic Studies, at the National Defense University.

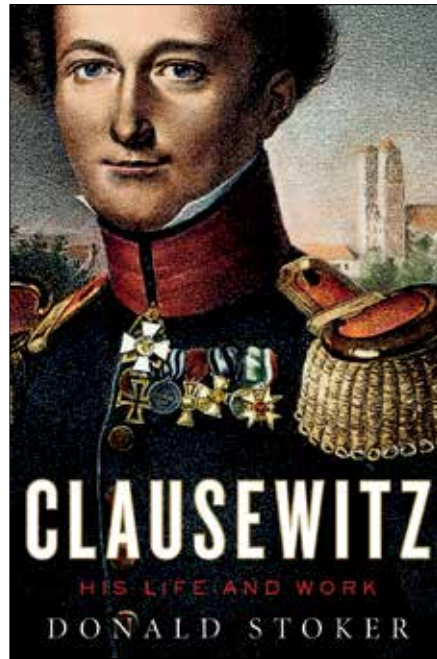
---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Alderson, "Counter-insurgency: Learn and Adapt? Can We Do Better," *The British Army Review*, no. 142, Summer 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Andrew Mackay, "Helmand 2007–2008: Behavioural Conflict," in *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, ed. Jonathan Bailey, Richard Irons, and Hew Strachan (Burlington VT: Ashgate 2013), 261.

<sup>3</sup> See the chapter titled "Cracking On: British Military Culture and Doctrine" in Frank Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).



## Clausewitz: His Life and Work

By Donald Stoker  
Oxford University Press, 2014  
354 pp. \$27.99  
ISBN: 978-0199357949

Reviewed by John T. Kuehn

Donald Stoker, a professor of strategy and policy at the Naval Postgraduate School, has written what could be labeled a military biography of Carl von Clausewitz. One might reasonably ask why a biography of the Prussian general and military theorist is necessary, given Peter Paret's towering intellectual biography *Clausewitz and the State* (Princeton University Press, 1985).

The answer is threefold: new sources, new scholarship, and accessibility for

new audiences. Stoker's biography is also the result of a fruitful collaboration with Vanya Eftimova Bellinger, the first historian to publish a biography in English about Clausewitz's formidable wife and intellectual partner, Countess Marie von Brühl. Together, Stoker and Bellinger mined a treasure trove of recently rediscovered correspondence between Carl and Marie held in Germany by the couple's descendants. Stoker sprinkles this correspondence throughout his work, and it provides great value in understanding Clausewitz as he confides his innermost thoughts to his soulmate, the woman who took his unfinished work and had it published. The author also uses Clausewitz's own histories as well as those of his contemporaries (including Antoine-Henri de Jomini) to inform his work, including recent English translations of Clausewitz's work such as that of the Waterloo campaign by Christopher Bassford. In addition to these primary sources, Stoker uses the most recent and cutting-edge Napoleonic scholarship on key campaigns by Alexander Mikaberidze and Michael Leggiere.

Finally, there is the issue of accessibility for new audiences. Stoker states that his purpose for the book is to answer the question "How did it come to be written?" The reader learns that from the age of 11 until his death in 1831 at the age of 51, Clausewitz served first and foremost as a soldier. This speaks to the book's appeal to military professionals. Stoker has made Clausewitz more accessible to the military professionals of today by putting him into the context of his times as a long-serving soldier—including his disappointments, frustrations, and personal experiences with cold, heat, thirst, and danger—providing additive credibility and a human dimension. Readers meet a human Clausewitz who felt pain, hunger, and loneliness, experienced setbacks, and struggled with chronic ailments such as gout and arthritis throughout his life.

Readers will also discover in detail Clausewitz's participation in some of the most famous campaigns of the French and Napoleonic wars, including Russia in 1812 and Waterloo in 1815, as well as some of the more obscure battles. These