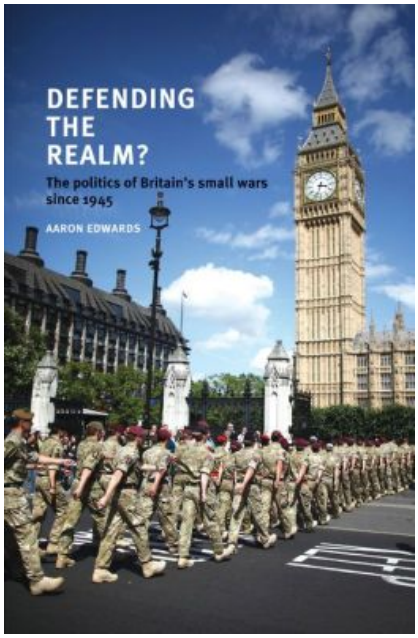
Book Review: Defending the Realm? The Politics of Britain's Small Wars Since 1945

Blog Admin

Britain is often revered for its extensive experience of waging 'small wars'. Its long imperial history is littered with high profile counter-insurgency campaigns, thus marking it out as the world's most seasoned practitioner of this type of warfare. In ***Defending the Realm? Aaron Edwards*** *details the tactical and operational dynamics of Britain's small wars, arguing that the military's use of force was more heavily constrained by wider strategic and political considerations than previously admitted.* ***Andrew Holt*** *finds a concise, readable text that should be of interest to students and scholars of British foreign policy, international relations, and security studies.*

Defending the Realm? The Politics of Britain's Small Wars Since 1945. Aaron Edwards. Manchester University Press. December 2012.

Find this book:



In March 2003, British forces joined a US-led coalition in invading Iraq. Within a month President Saddam Hussein had been toppled. However, it was not until 2009 that British combat troops pulled out of the country, with the situation following the pattern of many other 'small wars'. These conflicts, typically clandestine in nature and fought against non-state actors, "have been an integral part of British military experience for hundreds of years" (p. 2). They were particularly prominent for the United Kingdom in the aftermath of World War II as decolonisation progressed. Thus, as we mark the tenth anniversary of the beginning of the Iraq War, and with British troops finally on the verge of withdrawal from Afghanistan following the conflict that began in October 2001, now is an opportune moment to examine the contemporary historical record of Britain's small wars.

In his new book, Aaron Edwards focuses on the strategic dimension of these conflicts, paying particular attention to relations between civilian and military leaders. The first five chapters consider colonial operations in Palestine, Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus and Aden respectively. Malaya is of particular interest. This campaign has often been highlighted as an example of how to successfully fight an asymmetrical war, yet it was far from an unmitigated success. Indeed, Edwards shows how "failure was only narrowly averted" thanks to the actions of the colonial government's reorganisation of civil and military leadership (pp. 61–62). In contrast, "in terms of civil-military relations, Aden was an unmitigated failure" (p. 179) with Lt Col Colin Mitchell ('Mad Mitch') at the centre of events after leading the reoccupation of Crater in July 1967.

Closer to home, Edwards demonstrates how, despite its "intellectual reservoir of colonial experience", "the Army was woefully unprepared for operations in Northern Ireland" (p. 193). This chapter is particularly comprehensive, no doubt benefiting from the author's earlier research on Ulster. Taking place on home soil, the troubles represent a very different small war. There was the added complication of coordinating with the police, which was eased by 1977 by the ultimate emergence of police primacy. Managing the gap between London's strategic lead and tactics on the ground also proved difficult, with 'Mad Mitch' warned of just this in the House of Commons after his election in 1970.

The final two chapters are somewhat different. The operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are too recent for the full range of archival sources to be available, though the author does make use of the material declassified as part of the Chilcot Inquiry. Both missions were also notable in the sense that Britain was part of a coalition, and eventually also had to liaise with a host nation. The chapter on Afghanistan would benefit from being from being a little longer, though it does highlight issues of political interference. On Iraq, Edwards is at times particularly damning, arguing that "Despite the dedication and professionalism of the armed forces in implementing government policy, the politicians failed the soldiers" (p. 252). Planning was rushed and hidden, with the Chief of the Defence Staff even prevented by the Defence Secretary from liaising with the Chief of Defence Logistics for fear that, if leaked, knowledge of such a meeting could damage the negotiations taking place at the UN.

Each case study engages the relevant literature and shows how lessons from earlier missions were applied – or not, as the case may be. Indeed, "it is the tendency to identify the wrong lessons that has often spelt disaster for Britain" (p. 267). Knowledge gained from Northern Ireland was misapplied in Iraq; the reasons for success in Malaya and elsewhere not suitably considered in Afghanistan. The importance of intelligence is another common theme, and is highlighted and elucidated very well. Again, lessons were sometimes learnt slowly. Structural problems of intelligence were identified in Aden despite its importance in Malaya, while intelligence failures were also partly responsible for the events of Bloody Sunday.

The book provides an excellent overview of a number of significant case studies, showing how "The initial absence of an overarching end goal has been the signature piece of most of Britain's 'small wars'" (p. 247). It is well-informed by the literature of strategic studies, but also handles an array of historical source material expertly. Government documents and the collections of private papers are supplemented by interviews with soldiers who saw active service. While acknowledging British successes where appropriate it concludes that "Britain has typically misapplied force against its irregular opponents in the short term, before, finally, re-calibrating its approach for success in the long term" (p. 288). The book is concise, readable and should be of interest to students and scholars of British foreign policy, international relations and security studies.

Andrew Holt is currently Teaching Associate in Diplomacy and International History at The University of Nottingham. His research interests lie in the field of twentieth-century British foreign policy. Read more reviews by Andrew.