



*Mike Martin. An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict. London, UK: C. Hurst & Co., 2014.*

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The historians of the Annales School developed an approach that emphasized long-term regional histories based upon social structures and worldviews, in part because they believed the narrowness of political and diplomatic history to be reductive. The first half of Mike Martin's An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict, adapted from his doctoral research at King's College and drawing on his experience as an army officer in Afghanistan, evokes this approach, while the

second half explores how the absence of such a grounding in the local dynamics of Helmand province resulted in a profound misunderstanding of parties to the conflict and their goals, and thus a flawed and sometimes counterproductive approach to military and political efforts there. An Intimate War makes a solid argument that the narratives driving the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) were largely mistaken, and that misperception accounted for poor policy and misguided operations; it also raises questions for future research, including why organizations and individuals adopted and hewed to inadequate models, and implicitly how this might be avoided in future military engagements.

Martin begins by summarizing the history of the Helmand region, establishing that the roots of the tangled loyalties central to his later chapters stretch back to the hybrid of tribal and feudal governance, if that is not too strong a word, that developed in the 16th century. The picture that emerges is of leaders skilled at using wealth, land and prestige to manipulate internal challengers, and particularly at playing external threats off each other, talents that developed long before the first English involvement in the region in 1839, for which Helmandis still express resentment. Misguided interventions leading to increased conflict, stemming from misreading tribal allegiances and rivalries, or failing to anticipate the demographic disruption that followed canal and dam construction, also characterized the English and then American experiences there, as did the desire to use development in Afghanistan as an element of geostrategy. Many of the dynamics that characterize the current intervention, therefore, are not new, an insight that did not properly inform the counterinsurgency in which Martin participated.

The Soviet occupation and Afghan response were viewed in the west through the prism of the Cold War. In practice, conflicts and allegiances most often stemmed not from support for or antipathy to communism or the west, but rather from tribal or territorial tensions that became, to outsiders, projected on to these axes. The ease with which local actors switched allegiances from mujahidin to government indicates the porosity, if not irrelevance, of those labels. Commanders' "[c]hoice of mujahidin party was often driven by private, pre-revolutionary disagreements, and [...] on-going feuds" (76). Both the government and mujahidin leaders often failed to recognize the

complexity of local politics, facilitating the pursuit of tribal or personal agendas in the guise of affiliation with either group. After the Soviet withdrawal, the same groups in Helmand that had been fighting continued to do so, with labels sometimes changing but the nature of the groups and of their conflict persisting. The growing success of the Taliban in these years Martin attributes to their superior understanding of low-level politics and dynamics, rather than to the intrinsic appeal of their religious conservatism, which was significantly more jarring to outsiders than ever it was to Afghans themselves, particularly outside Kabul.

This reframing of Helmandi history with reference to local identity and conflict sets the stage for the second half of the book, which begins in the aftermath of 9/11. Martin sees the early years of the war in Helmand as riddled with “very bad decisions made by Western actors,” whose ignorance of their environment and the various forces interacting there “was extensively manipulated by the same Helmandi actors that had manipulated the Soviets and the mujahidin parties” (112). While some progress was made in terms of understanding the narrative driving local actors and external parties, including Iran and Pakistan, in the decade plus of war that followed, the failures described in *An Intimate War* were remarkably consistent, and indeed were congruent with the problems that had characterized other interventions in earlier generations.

One element of life in Helmand that persistently frustrated western intervention – and caused problems for the Taliban themselves – was the opium trade. After initially discouraging poppy farming, the Taliban soon gave in, only to impose a hard ban in 2000, which did substantial damage to their support in Helmand, particularly when rumours emerged that the ban was not motivated by religion but by a desire to manipulate the market and earn higher prices for opium reserves. Locals who depended upon the poppy for their subsistence were far more likely to oppose the British or Americans from fear that their crops were to be destroyed than for more abstract or political reasons, and it was not uncommon for leaders hostile to the west to marshal support by telling farmers that soldiers had established a presence near them specifically to eradicate their fields. Trying to undermine one such attempt, British officers met with farmers for an informal lesson on harvesting poppies, which was received with horror at headquarters, because this could be construed as supporting the narcotics trade, or at least failing sufficiently to fight it. The linkage of ‘narcoterrorism’

with the Taliban and Afghanistan, generated by the commentariat and some spokesmen as an intrinsic component of the conflict, interfered with effective counterinsurgency; in fact it was in this case antithetical to it, since earning the trust and loyalty (or at least respect) of the local population could never be achieved while this same population was being impoverished directly by the same military meant to counter the insurgency.

Another persistent problem, also related to misperception or the too literal translation of a western worldview to the Helmandi context, was in the conflation of religious fundamentalism with “insurgents” or the Taliban. The destruction of schools that taught girls became emblematic in media discussions of Afghanistan of all that was wrong with the country, and the extension of the franchise and basic education to girls and women was touted domestically in the countries contributing to the ISAF as a signal accomplishment. The destruction of schools, therefore, became symbolic of something much greater, a manifestation of misogyny and the Taliban rejection of modernity. In reality, just as groups switched allegiances based upon their own interests, local rivalries, and financial and political considerations (rather than as a function of their faith), so did attacks on schools represent something much more complicated – and at odds with the narrative to which most western forces involved in Afghanistan subscribed. Martin unpacks the factors behind the destruction of a co-education school in Shin Kalay: upon arriving in the village, the British were told that the Taliban had recently torn down a school there, as an attack against local police, with whom the British were allied. However, the village elders had fought the Soviets as mujahidin in the 1980s, while the police were the heirs, and in some cases the veterans, of a pro-Soviet force from those years. The ‘police’ had also made a habit of molesting local children and stealing from villagers; an informal self-defense league of villagers banded together, and were labeled Taliban. Further, the group that destroyed the school was driven by jealousy of the prestige that attached to the clan on whose land the school was built. The Taliban leader of the village was subsequently removed from office, because the Taliban disapproved of the school’s destruction. Despite the gloss that Taliban misogynists were denying village children, particularly girls, of education out of antimodern religious conviction, the proximate cause was intervillage rivalry, fuelled by decades of jockeying for advantage regardless of which larger struggles were going on in and around the village. More generally, particularly in the rural south, strict

imposition of Islamic law was neither widely unpopular nor a Taliban innovation.

The narrative of counterinsurgency itself is the third, and overarching, source of misunderstanding in the story Martin tells. Informed by the major studies of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies from the 20th century, the approach to pacification and development implemented by both the British and US forces in Helmand (and Afghanistan) presupposed a government, whose legitimacy was to be reinforced and capacity enhanced; an insurgency, relatively cohesive and determined to gain political supremacy over the same territory controlled by the government; and a large body in the middle, with strong loyalties to neither, whose support would be won or lost by the government (and its supporting forces, whether local or foreign) as it protected and helped, or else left undefended, the local population. In fact, as Martin makes abundantly clear, this was almost entirely incorrect. The undecided middle existed, but their willingness to cooperate with British forces had much less to do with the risk they perceived from the Taliban than with whether their livelihoods and local affairs were compromised by foreign involvement. The 'government' and 'Taliban' were generally actors who might hold a nominal, if malleable, affiliation with those groups, but were better understood in terms of their tribal, financial and historic interests, as well as with whom they had allied or fought during the Soviet occupation or in the interlude between the Soviets and 9/11.

These are the major issues, although there are many others touched upon, that highlight how flawed conceptions of the conflict and its participants hampered effective military action in Helmand. There is a grim irony in that the 'Taliban,' too, often subscribed to wildly inaccurate narratives when evaluating their enemy, such as the belief among some Helmandis, which Martin documents, that the war there was really a proxy between US forces, who fought the Taliban, and the British, who secretly support the Taliban, as part of a long-standing campaign to reestablish their role as a colonial power there. The ISAF narrative may be nearly this simplistic and mistaken, when compared with the reality of allegiances, conflict and roles in Helmand.

A better conception might leave warfare and sovereignty behind, as well as the terms that spin off of such a model such as 'government' and 'insurgent,' in favour of framing it as a form of organized crime, driven in part by opportunism but equally by

feuds, personalities and prestige. It is not altogether surprising that, among loan words now in the Helmandi vernacular, 'mafia' features prominently. When a local fighter was killed, his tribe would supply a replacement from the same family to avenge his death. This meant in practice that someone who had joined the fight as much for pragmatic reasons as for any other – and who could therefore in theory be persuaded to abandon the fight – was replaced by someone charged with repaying a blood debt, and therefore much more intractable. When viewing the struggle as military in nature, this makes no sense, whereas a 'mafia' or gang orientation dovetails neatly with the reality.

While Martin illustrates how the British (and indirectly, the US) intervention started with some very wrong assumptions, it's not clear how, in the first days of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), it could have been otherwise. Knowledge of the region, its customs, languages and cultures was minimal, and it was not unreasonable to use as starting premises the narratives of narcoterrorism, religious fanaticism and 20th century counterinsurgency strategy (COIN), particularly given the domestic implications of these arguments. What is harder to explain is why experience in the months and years that followed had so little effect on the development of a new and more accurate conception, from which more apt strategy and operations might flow. Intensive efforts were made to recruit and train speakers of local languages – including Martin himself – but these new linguists tended not to work as, or with, decision-makers, and thus any insights they gained into the reality of the conflict (as compared to the accepted narratives) were insulated from those who might help shape or promulgate a better narrative.

An Intimate War is not a history of the war in Afghanistan, the Global War on Terrorism (GWOt), or 21st century counterinsurgency. Martin makes clear the parameters of his work, and also indicates why it would be unwise to extrapolate too much from his work to the wider conflicts, or to other wars, given the specific circumstances in Helmand, such as the decades-long population shift in response to drought and irrigation projects; the proximity of Iran, which introduced new considerations and had an undeniable influence in that province; and the peculiar hostility the Helmandis had for the British in particular. This work lays the foundation for much future research, including similarly in-depth looks at the histories of, and

counterinsurgencies in, other provinces in Afghanistan and Iraq. It also highlights the need for study into why institutions and militaries adopt mistaken initial premises, and more importantly why groups and individuals retain these flawed conceptions even as it becomes clear that they are failing to achieve their goals. Above all, Martin demonstrates the futility of trying to understand intrastate conflict, much less intervene in such conflicts, without grasping the implications of the local history, culture, politics and social dynamics.

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