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Part of the special issue entitled *Stories of world politics: between history and fiction*

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# A haunting past: British defence, historical narratives, and the politics of presentism

## *Part of the special issue entitled Stories of world politics: between history and fiction*

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**Abstract** *This article examines historical fictions as social processes by which ideas about conflict and warfare are constructed and narrated within society. Focusing on Britain, it explores 'truth telling' about the past in an applied context, examining efforts to construct and sustain narratives about Britain's military past and their role in upholding forms of political and societal consensus that underpin the development and use of military power. We offer a typology of the ways in which Western liberal states shape and mobilise historical fictions within their distinctive forms of militarism and civil-military relations: 'Telling Stories'—curating and sustaining social understandings of military power through public displays, museums, and ceremonies; 'Hiding Pasts'—using state power to shape academic research and to occlude aspects of the military past; and 'Knowing War'—legitimising the state and armed forces' claims to a monopoly of authoritative knowledge about war and security.*

References to the past are ubiquitous in the British armed forces. The year 2022 underlined the deep association between past and present on an almost continuous basis. Displays of military pageantry for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee and her state funeral both served to showcase the military's centrality to British state power and institutions, foregrounding ideas of tradition and the long association between monarch and military. Past and present were bound together directly to convey a sense of reassuring continuity through the use of overtly historical symbols such as a Victorian-era naval gun carriage and the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight. The past has also been mobilised in the context of Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine. Speaking in June 2022, the Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Patrick Sanders, underlined that he was the first officer 'since

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1941 to take up this position in the shadow of a major state land war in Europe', before going on to quote from remarks made by a predecessor in 1937 (Sanders 2022). Yet, in other ways, modern Defence is unable to escape from a haunting past, with ongoing controversies over historic military prosecutions and the visa status of Commonwealth service personnel remaining unresolved (Confederation of Service Charities 2022). We seek to establish a new research agenda that connects these forms of historical storytelling as actants within British politics, civil-military relations, and the armed forces themselves.

Our central premise is that storytelling and historical fictions should be seen as part of the broader social processes by which ideas about conflict and warfare are constructed and narrated within a given society. These processes form part of what Martin Shaw (1991, 9–15) has defined as militarism, namely 'the penetration of social relations in general by military relations'. These forms of social construction and storytelling are significant because they inform how states, societies, and even armed forces conceptualise conflict, make decisions about the recourse to war, and consider its conduct (Colley 2019; Vucetic 2022). We therefore offer a typology of the ways in which Western liberal states shape and mobilise historical fictions within their distinctive forms of militarism and civil-military relations, using the UK as an example in which history plays a particularly significant role in discussions about warfare and security (Barkawi and Brighton 2013; Blagden 2021). We highlight three principal categories of state action: 'Telling Stories'—the curation and sustainment of social understandings of military power through public displays, museums, and ceremonies; 'Hiding Pasts'—the use of state power to shape academic research and to occlude aspects of the military past; and 'Knowing War'—the legitimisation of the state and armed forces' claims to a monopoly of authoritative knowledge about war and security. Significantly, we also reflect upon the consequences—intended and unintended—of the state's actions in each regard.

Our work builds upon a diverse range of scholarship, but is particularly informed by three key theoretical positions or debates. The first of these is drawn from strategic theory, and Clausewitz's notion of the 'trinity', through which he sought to describe the reciprocal relationships that shape the war's conduct. Clausewitz believed that passion, the play between probability and chance, and reason defined the conduct of war. These concepts, in turn, linked to a 'secondary trinity' of the people, military, and government, which 'are the components of a nation that goes to war, and how that nation makes its strategy' (Strachan and Harris 2020). In democratic societies, leaders depend upon processes of legitimising the recourse to war to their publics. This makes social attitudes and understandings of conflict a crucial factor in the formation of strategy, and the language and reference points used within this process an important actant within civil-military relations and the conduct of strategy (Goddard and Krebs 2015; Krebs 2015; Strachan 2020). To explore this point, our second source of inspiration is the approaches to militarisation developed within Feminist IR. Scholarship in this area has offered an innovative and valuable approach through which to re-appraise forms of civil-military interaction that underpin societies' relationship with war. In particular, we draw upon the ways in which individuals are socialised into accepting, valourising, and often reproducing military activity and power (Sylvester 2012, 43) to offer a fresh account of the ways in which the Defence establishment wields social

and political power within the UK, and to explore the implications of that power (Dixon 2020). Finally, we draw upon historians' growing interest in questions of presentism and regimes of time to theorise the competing ways that key actors within the UK Defence debate depict the relationship between past, present, and future. In particular, we seek to explore the insight that different groups and cultures perceive historical time and the relations between past, present, and future in different ways, (Steinmetz-Jenkins 2023, 562) and that these dynamics factor into the social processes that define contemporary militarism. Building on the revival of interest in the potentials of 'presentist' framings (Armitage 2023), we argue that acknowledging and exploring the multiple pasts and presents of Britain's military history may in fact permit thinking about war to escape from the 'monstrous present' (Hartog 2015), and to open fresh avenues for re-thinking the relationship between conflict and the British state in the twenty-first century.

The British case contains particular features, but also speaks to wider trends within patterns of Western liberal militarism. Britain offers an instance in which narratives about national security draw heavily upon ideas about the past (Barkawi and Brighton 2013; Blagden 2021). The historical practices of British war-making were distinct from their European counterparts (Edgerton 1991) and the mythologies linked to them often seek to emphasise these distinctions along national lines. This does not make the British case unique, however, and in many ways may be seen as comparable to other European post-imperial contexts (Gildea 2019; Thomas and Toye 2017), and to other societies in which identification with a military past retains a potent symbolism (see e.g. Lake and Reynolds 2010; Ubayasiri 2015). As Martin Shaw (2012) has argued, the 'radical changes' that have occurred in Western liberal society since the end of the Cold War have produced similar 'radical changes' in warfare—many of which are common across the Western world and have encouraged the development of more generalisable 'Western' ways of warfare (Basham 2018). Our examination of the social processes by which such forms of militarism are re-produced can be situated within this wider context. Yet, as has been argued, these processes of convergence have not collapsed the coexistence of multiple types of defence policy and forms of contemporary militarism within Western liberal states (Joana and Mérand 2014; Mabee and Vucetic 2018). As such, our study meets the call to examine 'the interplay of changes at the national level ... more thoroughly' (Joana and Mérand 2014, 188).

Our argument proceeds in three parts, each of which seeks to outline one aspect of our typology and thus to serve as a theme for potential future study in furthering this research agenda. The first section, 'Telling Stories', examines how the UK armed forces participate in the production and sustainment of stories and fictions about Britain's military past, and approaches these questions from the perspectives of militarisation and civil-military relations. We argue that Defence proactively propagates a valourising narrative of British war-making to generate popular support for the armed forces. Through a range of social and cultural activities, Defence seeks to solidify the armed forces' standing within British society, and to sustain an image of the UK as 'hero' rather than 'villain' (Kirkwood 2019, 309). Yet, at the same time, these stories reinforce and legitimate simplistic and binary understandings of conflict, sacrificing any attempt to foster democratic engagement with the exercise of

military power. By adopting an expansive conception of civil-military relations, we argue that these efforts therefore risk undermining the state's capacity to make effective strategy. Our second section, 'Hiding Pasts', focuses upon the impact of histories that Defence is keen to erase, silence, or to ignore. We argue that a concern for political embarrassment and the armed forces' public reputation results in a narrowness and unrealism about the multiple ways in which the modern UK and its security state is permeated by the legacies of empire and historic war-making. Whereas conservative commentators and historians are keen to contest and defend this history, we seek to build upon earlier work (notably Barkawi and Brighton 2013) to argue that 'presentism' in fact offers the armed forces the opportunity to re-make their relationship with Britain's past, present, and future in a manner that embraces the multiple pasts of Britain at war in all their diversity. Finally, 'Knowing War' explores the role of historical fictions in the development of knowledge about war within the UK. 'Presentist' concerns dominate how armed forces consider war, often at the expense of their ability to think flexibly about multiple potential futures (Colin Gray 2014, 18–19). To a degree this influence is mirrored in the production of knowledge about war across the civil-military divide, as the imperatives to study conflict for instrumental purposes retain a powerful influence over disciplines such as war studies (Barkawi and Brighton 2011). In this context, so-called 'military history' is often dismissed as 'irrelevant' by armed forces focussed on the future, and viewed as conservative or methodologically suspect within academe. Yet ideas about the past persist, and continue to inform military discourses, and to justify policies and reforms. We therefore argue that historians' methodological turn to 'presentism' offers a productive moment to re-engage historians with the kinds of questions and issues that concern armed forces—not as a form of instrumentalised knowledge, but to de-construct the hierarchical claims to speak 'truth' about war that limit the UK's capacity to change its relationship with war in the twenty-first century.

### **Telling stories**

Visions of a heroic martial past play a prominent role in British culture. As Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton (2013, 1115) memorably summed up, this 'military and political imaginary, derived from misty-eyed accounts of the Second World War, combined with mythologies of Britain's imperial past and its English heritage' produces a 'heady' and 'obscurantist' brew. Narratives of the Second World War have proven particularly influential in shaping mainstream accounts of modern British history, and thus of the present. As David Edgerton (2021, 982–983) argues, the increasingly salient 'national' framings of Britishness after 1945 have downplayed the military aspects of that war in favour of accounts stressing the significance of civilians, the rise of the national welfare state, or the growing power of the USA. The nature and application of British imperial and military power thus continues to be misunderstood in many mainstream accounts, even as the war itself is reified as a site of national solidarity (Edgerton 1998). By contrast, the resonance of Britain's long experience of colonial and de-colonial war-making—which persisted for decades after 1945—is minimal, and often confined to marginal portions of the nostalgic British right (Wallace 2022, 108–109). Mainstream political right and left are

thus united in a form of ‘geohistorical pandemonium’ which renders neither able to engage with the historical reality of Britain at war, nor the modern-day legacies of war or empire (Barkawi and Brighton 2013, 1118). The result is a pervasive obscurantism that venerates the past whilst failing to take account of its meaning in the present.

These stories have tangible impacts. The British Defence establishment exists within these narratives, and proactively participates in their sustainment and renewal. Recent research on the British Army’s officer training academy at Sandhurst, for example, has revealed the extent to which ideas about the past feature in cadets’ motivations and mental worlds. When asked to list ‘what events first come to mind when you think about the history of Britain?’, 76.5% of the 481 cadets surveyed responded with the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> Britain’s historic role was frequently cited as related to cadets’ decisions to join the Army: 79% of cadets identified as having a ‘keen interest’ in history with over half the cadets surveyed confirming that their country’s history influenced their decision to join the Army (Kayß 2019, 93–97). If officer cadets display a strong interest in Britain’s military past before joining the armed forces, upon signing up they are socialised and enculturated into the rituals and traditions of their services and units, many of which make strong links with historic experience to develop cohesion. Historic symbols such as regimental colours displaying battle honours, mess silver, and artwork depicting historic events play a prominent part in a process of ‘sacralisation’ (Bury 2017, 318–319).

Perhaps because of this propensity to identify with the past and the role of historic reference points within military life, the Defence establishment exerts significant effort to sustain particular public narratives about Britain’s military history. This occurs through multiple forms of purposefully orchestrated communication, including heritage, commemoration activities, and public engagement, with the aim of generating forms of meaning and contact between the armed forces and wider society, often through a shared view of Britain’s martial past. While the ways that the US military ‘pays for patriotism’ have received far more attention than its British equivalents (Sylvester 2018, 154), we show in this section that the UK armed forces play an active presence within British culture through two cases: curating the military museum and the military’s role in ceremonial and civic events. Through this exploration, we highlight some of the tensions that pervade Defence’s attempts to curate an image of itself *via* the privileging of particular stories about Britain at war.

With over 130 military museums in the UK, the heritage sector represents a key site of encounter between the public and the military. Museums are complex cultural sites of both learning and storytelling, riven with often unresolved tensions between celebratory, sanitary, and realistic depictions of war (Danilova and Purnell 2020; Scott 2015; Taber 2022, 104). They serve as part of a process of making and re-making the meaning of the nation through the construction of a form of collective social memory which both *includes* and *excludes* (Hall 1999). The act of selecting objects and curating the story—‘canonisation’ in Stuart Hall’s (1999) words—confers authority upon institutions, thereby solidifying the ‘truths’ they convey. Indeed, as Christine Sylvester (2009, 55) notes, such objects and the stories told about them ‘provide tangible proof that

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<sup>1</sup> The First World War came second with 43 percent.



the nation had a memorable past, an honorable past, a prestigious past, a past the world can mark and that the nation can protect today'. In the context of military museums, telling stories about the past thus serves to (re)enforce Defence's claims to speak with authority about war, and perpetuates particular understandings of conflict within society, imbuing them with the authority of military expertise.

Whether we conceive of them as a 'bridge to the past' (Hartog 2021, 464) or, for UK Defence (2017, 8), as 'linking the past with the present and making links to the future', museums represent important temporal sites. Curatorial practices allow for the selection and conservation of the past in the present, with the past conceived as something precious to be preserved from forgetfulness or destruction, venerated as a common military heritage (Bouton 2019). Defence's 2017 review of the three service museums—the National Museum of the Royal Navy, the National Army Museum, and the Royal Air Force Museum—highlighted their important contribution to the armed forces' 'moral component', which is reinforced by a 'deep sense of unity and belonging ... based on the heritage story' of the three services (Ministry of Defence 2017, 26). Used in this way, the idea of a singular 'military story' as the basis of a heritage culture predicated upon a 'duty to remember' (Hartog 2015, 191) constitutes a purposeful form of civil-military dialogue intended to buttress societal support for Britain's armed forces. This is an explicit and purposeful act on behalf of the state. In 2018 the professional head of the British Army commissioned 'Project CLIO', an effort to consider the 'adequacy' of the Army's 'overall approach to preserving, managing, enhancing and capitalising on its heritage.' The resultant Army Heritage Strategy positioned 'heritage' as 'a powerful conceptual and practical asset for the Army' (British Army n.d., 1). Amongst its 'strategic objectives', the document listed 'the British Army's engagement with, and education of, the nation', a goal that could be measured by increases to the 'individual and collective understanding of the Army narrative; of the contemporary Army and its unique, indispensable purpose' (British Army n.d., 4–5). There is thus little doubt that the armed forces seek to exert significant influence over the content, focus, and tone of the multiple forms of public-facing activity they consider part of 'heritage'.<sup>2</sup>

Gathering, telling, and preserving these stories provides the 'basis of the outreach to the wider population', underpinning the military museum's important role in mediating civil-military relations (Clarke 2023; Ministry of Defence 2017, 26). This mediation is clearly apparent in the redeveloped National Army Museum (NAM) where, as David Clarke (2023, 9) argues, the museum's rhetoric is 'focused throughout on persuading civilians of their responsibility not only for deploying the army, but also for reflecting on their own relationships to it'. UK Defence—from whom the NAM receives Grant-in-Aid funding—is explicit that the museum ought to serve as a 'place where the historical provenance of the Army's values and ethos are explained using history and the stories of those that have served' (National Army Museum 2022, 4).

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<sup>2</sup> The Army Heritage Strategy states that 'Heritage is displayed in its most visible form in many formal and informal ways including, but not exclusively: music; ceremonial and public activity; individual and collective traditions, actions and behaviour, institutions like RMAS (Royal Military Academy Sandhurst); museums; homecoming parades and regional engagement activities'.

The NAM's redevelopment occurred during a time of upheaval in UK civil-military relations with military personnel concerned that public support and understanding of the armed forces had been damaged by their association with unpopular wars of choice (McCartney 2010; Strachan and Harris 2020; Whetham 2017). Yet 'presentist' motivations and the duty to venerate particular stories about Britain's military past place significant constraints upon curators' ambitions to adopt more radical approaches to understanding this past. These tensions were revealed after the opening of the re-developed NAM in 2017. The re-design saw the museum eschew a traditional chronological layout for a more dialogic, thematic approach. This comprised displays questioning the ethics of war, which included questions such as 'what constitutes a good cause' and 'what is the fine line between questioning and torture'. Through its 'Insight' gallery, which spotlighted collections from the Panjab, West Africa, and Sudan, the NAM engaged in a process of co-curation and reinterpretation with local community groups. By doing so, it presented multiple, entangled stories about objects in its collections while (re)connecting communities with these objects (Massie 2022, 232). In many respects, the NAM was taking a 'radical step in seeking to reassess collections derived from colonial warfare and present them in terms of heritage that is shared' (Massie 2022, 244). Such a step aligned with Barkawi and Brighton's (2013, 1121) call for the realisation of 'Brown Britain'—replacing the single narrative of island history with the 'relational, global histories from which modern Britain derives'. While some reviews appreciated the ambition of the re-design (McCormack 2017; Smyth 2017), others were more critical. Andrew Roberts (2017), for example, asked 'why should [the NAM] be somewhere that leaves visitors ashamed of the Army's supposed legacy of colonialism, imperialism and slavery, when that constituted only a tiny part of its story, and isn't accurately portrayed anyhow?'

Responding to this criticism and 'feedback received from the public', the NAM's leadership, under the newly appointed Major General (ret'd) Justin Maciejewski, sought to refine its galleries to 'better inspire and connect the public to the history of Our Army' (National Army Museum 2019: 6). Certain displays, such as the 'Ethics' wall in the 'Battle' gallery, were initial priorities. More recently, the 'Insight' gallery was replaced by a new 'Formation' gallery, which now explores the origins and traditions of the British Army. This ongoing process of refinement, which aims to 'more strongly link the interior and exterior of the Museum with Our Army' (National Army Museum 2021, 8), was applauded by Roberts (2022) as rescuing the museum from 'the jaws of wokery' and marking a return to an 'evidence-based, objective perspective'.<sup>3</sup> Yet, some employees were reportedly concerned that this refinement process signalled an 'outdated approach' to colonialism as well as moving towards a 'sanitisation and disneyfication' of army history (Adams 2021). Dedicated to telling 'the story of Our Army and the people who have served in it', the NAM remains a site of contestation where the imperative to boost visitor numbers and to attract funding clearly requires it to conform in certain ways to the expectations of stakeholders—whether they are visitors or the institutions that fund it.

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<sup>3</sup> Lord Roberts was appointed to the NAM's council in 2020.



Similar dynamics can be observed in national ceremonial and civic duties—whether through martial displays such as ‘Trooping the Colour’, or events such as Remembrance Day and Armed Forces Day. This wider cultural imaginary is a site wherein ‘significant political battles are fought’ (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009), and where narratives about the armed forces can be popularised and shared with wider society. The repetitiveness of many of these events, particularly Trooping the Colour and Remembrance Day, appear to offer a ‘patterned reassurance’ (Freedon 2011, 1), conveying a sense of continuity over time, with the two events skilfully and deliberately concertinaing past, present, and future. Both Remembrance Day and the relatively new Armed Forces Day raise difficult questions about the relationship between the public and the military. Remembrance (or Armistice) Day, instituted in 1921, was initially concerned with the ‘fallen’ of the First World War, but now has a more expansive remit, namely to honour ‘those who serve to defend our democratic freedoms and way of life’ (Royal British Legion website). Armed Forces Day, established in 2009 to foster civic recognition for the UK’s armed forces, urges the public to ‘show your support for the men and women who make up the Armed Forces community’ (Armed Forces Day website). Both events offer an opportunity for contact between the public and the military: Remembrance Day is a more solemn affair, while Armed Forces Day is a site where the public is encouraged to ‘admire the professional soldier’s expertise *via* military demonstrations and exhibits’ (Palmer 2017, 139) and, in Defence’s (2011, 85) words, ‘generate ... understanding at a national, regional, and local level’.

For critical military studies scholars, these ceremonial and civic events are contentious, particularly in the language and imagery used. Victoria Basham (2016, 883) has argued persuasively that the practice of British remembrance and civic-military display ‘relies upon the drawing of racial and gendered boundaries’, which continue to glorify a masculine ideal of heroic-war-making. Where Remembrance Day is concerned, war is reproduced as a matter of sacrifice, remembrance and mourning are separated out from the use of force, enabling the state and the military to reframe violence by focusing on themes of heroism and duty (Basham 2016, 885; Christoyannopoulos 2023, 9–10). The tendency to analogise and mythologise past wars invites the risk that the “past” becomes affirmation of the present’ (Basham 2016, 884). Armed Forces Day, on the other hand, has been considered a ‘de facto military recruitment fair’ where children in particular are exposed to the ‘educational and physical benefits’ of engaging with the military (Danilova 2015, 92–93; Palmer 2017, 189). These events—which also encompass other martial spectacles such as military tattoos and air shows—blur together ‘traditional’ elements of remembrance with entertainment (McGarry 2022, 285). As such, the tensions present in the military heritage sector—between celebratory, sanitary, and realistic portrayals of conflict and the armed forces—are just as evident in these ceremonial and civic events. Yet, despite these efforts to connect the public with the armed forces, a 2019 YouGov poll noted that 69% of the British public know little or very little about what the armed forces do on a day-to-day basis (Royal British Legion 2019), highlighting the important distinction between venerating the armed forces as an institution, and understanding the reality of their professional roles.

As our case studies suggest, the stories about Britain's military past—which the armed forces are engaged in shaping and promulgating—are an important factor within the forms of civil-military engagement that underpin the British government's conceptualisation and use of armed force. The social construction of conflict and foreign affairs shapes the parameters within which the British state makes policy (Colley 2019). While causal relationships are impossible to establish definitively, prominent beliefs about Britain needing to play a proactive role as a global 'force for good' with a strong armed forces remains a barrier to imagining what one writer has termed a 'lesser' British foreign policy (Blagden 2019; Vucetic 2022, 262). Significantly, the interaction between public and elite opinion, predicated upon identity and shared narratives, can be seen as exerting an increasingly important role in this regard—underlining the importance of efforts to shape common social attitudes to conflict. How nations narrate their histories therefore has tangible implications for the formation of security and defence policy, and exercises a particular impact in the UK (Colley 2019, 20–23, 46–48).

In this sense, tensions exist then between the prominence of selective narratives about the past, and the perceived security imperatives of the present. Senior military officers and doctrine writers have been at pains to stress that modern conflict has collapsed barriers between 'home and abroad', bringing entire societies into a new era of threat and competition. Resilience in the face of such threats requires public understanding, and a process of education about the nature of the contemporary security environment. As one recent report commissioned by the MoD's Development, Concepts, and Doctrine Centre argued, 'educating people on how to prepare for a crisis will improve societal resilience' (Caves et al. 2021, 52). An overt focus on a select range of historic 'good wars' and particular narratives about Britain's military past is ill-conceived to meet this educational aim. Defence's unwillingness to communicate openly about contemporary conflict thus risks undermining Britain's capacity to form and sustain coherent strategy by offering no clear basis upon which society can interpret the use of armed force and judge its necessity (Strachan 2020; Strachan and Harris 2020).

This veil of historical constancy, expressed in terms of continuity and tradition, can be read as offering a façade behind which significant shifts to Britain's defence posture occur with minimal public or political debate. British defence has been subject to extensive cuts over the past two decades. Beginning under New Labour and accelerating under the coalition and Conservative governments, spending has been consistently suppressed and demands upon the armed forces attenuated. Conservative politicians have been eager to triumph new warships and the carrier strike group as symbolic of 'Global Britain' (Brooke-Holland 2021, 4), while being far less concerned with the condition of the armed forces because of their cuts. Multiple retired senior officers have spoken out, questioning whether this gradual process of cuts to specific areas of Defence has left a whole that is now far less than the sum of its parts, and unable to fulfil key functions effectively (Brown 2022; Hughes 2017; Sheridan 2022). These cuts have not been accompanied by a meaningful reckoning with whether the armed forces require fundamental re-organisation, but rather have focused on specific enabling capabilities and apparent redundancies, often avoiding politically difficult decisions such as

disbanding regiments or historic squadrons. Public dissent from serving personnel has been curtailed to present an impression of a unified Defence establishment which is thus better able to sustain the armed forces' position from further government intervention (Strachan 2003; Strachan and Harris 2020). Beneath a veneer of continuity and permanence, major changes to the working conditions and capabilities of the armed forces have thus been driven by the politics of austerity and the specific interests of the Conservative Party (Bury and Catignani 2019).

### Hiding pasts

While the previous section explored the ways that UK Defence seeks to curate and exploit public imagery, we now turn to our second theme: the ways in which the British state is actively involved in processes of fictionalisation through its attempt to control the ability of civil society (including academics) to scrutinise its historic activities. As Richard Aldrich (2004, 923) has argued, the British state has expended 'considerable resources in offering [its] own carefully packaged versions of the past'. Such processes are often justified as necessary on the grounds of 'national security', a stance that invites scepticism due to the claim's inherent subjectivity and malleability. However, we argue that there is a value to taking this idea at face value, and positioning it as an expression of 'presentism' that highlights the weight that the past holds within the UK security state. Seen in this way, efforts to withhold access to sensitive historic episodes highlights the enduring influence of social, political, and imperial assumptions and hierarchies within the British state. Opening these issues up to research and scrutiny would, we suggest, offer a valuable opportunity for civil society to engage in a re-making of British foreign and defence policy in the twenty-first century, in ways that accept the historic legacies that British war-making has left, rather than denying them. Or, as Jacques Derrida (1994, xvii-viii) exhorts, 'to learn to live *with* ghosts' with the aim of living more justly.

Aspects of Britain's military past are rendered opaque through various processes, ranging from omission and obstruction to the seemingly overt suppression of historical evidence. One potentially valuable venue for processing controversial episodes are the series of government official histories. These began in 1908 and have, since 1939, fallen under the Cabinet Office's remit. The most voluminous coverage pertains to the world wars though publications are still appearing, recently on foreign policy at the Cold War's end, for example. Official history offers the opportunity of 'making a positive response to the problems of policing the past' (Aldrich 2004, 953), yet, if conflicts after 1945 are gauged to be the most difficult to come to terms with, the programme's output is less than adventurous.<sup>4</sup> None of the wars of decolonisation, nor Northern Ireland have merited attention. Preserving national security and diplomatic relations represent valid reasons for blocking disclosure. However, a civil service discussion in the early 1970s about whether to initiate

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<sup>4</sup> Such official histories post-1945 have included the Korean War, the Falklands, the D-Notice system for relations with the press, the Joint Intelligence Committee, the nuclear deterrent, and defence economic intelligence (Hoskins and Ford 2017; Newson 2015; Whitehall Histories website).

further official histories on defence topics draws out another reason for hostility to reckoning with the past:

“Dirty Linen”, really a special kind of sensitivity, presents a rather different problem for defence histories. It may be taken to embrace individual errors of judgement, clashes of personality, incompetence in units, inter-service conflicts etc ... There is a natural human tendency to avoid describing such matters before the public and even within the profession. But this is so much a part of war that any account not giving it due weight could present a totally misleading picture of the reality of military operations. (Nash 1972)

What this amounts to is little more than a profound fear of embarrassment in an organisation poorly equipped to accept mistakes as natural or even positive opportunities for self-improvement. This has played out most notably in the withholding of records relating to controversial episodes in British defence’s history.

Strikingly, during the civil litigation over torture in Kenya in the 1950s, in 2011 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office admitted holding 8,800 files on former British colonies. Eventually over 21,000 files were transferred to the National Archives.<sup>5</sup> The Kenya court case attracted widespread media coverage and prompted Foreign Secretary William Hague to apologise in parliament for British conduct during the conflict. A further round of research continues to flow from the new archive releases (see e.g. Bennett 2012; Bruce-Lockhart 2014; French 2015; Hadjiathanasiou 2020; Pringle 2017). The MoD has greeted these public and scholarly revelations with silence. In 2013 journalist Ian Cobain discovered that the MoD—like most Whitehall departments—retained thousands of records outside the provisions of the Public Records Act (Cobain 2013). As of December 2020, the MoD held 46,000 records which should already have been reviewed for release to the National Archives, or destroyed as historically insignificant, while an additional nine and a half million records are legally retained (Ministry of Defence 2020a). The British state has been keen to characterise the release of records ‘as part of a benign policy of deliberate liberalisation’ (Aldrich 2014, 922), yet a 2021 investigation found a ‘Clearing House’ unit in the Cabinet Office which co-ordinated government responses to Freedom of Information Act requests, resulting in a substantial *decrease* in the volume of information being released (Amin 2021).

A further unwillingness to countenance open criticism is evident in Defence’s efforts to influence the ‘knowledge economy’ centred around defence and security in the UK. This was epitomised in former army officer Simon Akam’s experience in attempting to publish his book, *The Changing of the Guard*. It was reported that the MoD allegedly pressured Penguin Random House to cancel its contract with Akam after an academic at Oxford, who had seen a draft version, informed the publisher that the critical content might lead to legal action from persons mentioned in the text (Cain 2021).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the institution of the MoD’s Research Ethics Committee (MODREC) in 2005 now means that all research involving human participants within Defence is

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<sup>5</sup> For an insider’s account, see Anderson 2015.

<sup>6</sup> *The Changing of the Guard* was published by Scribe instead in 2021.

subject to approval, raising ‘important questions about democratic accountability of the military’ and ‘mak[ing] it harder for civilians, including researchers, to subject the military to oversight’ (Catignani and Basham 2021). This represents a particular barrier to feminist lines of enquiry due to the highly selective definition of research adopted by MODREC. Silence and secrecy then are the British defence establishment’s public response to its controversial history.

To a certain degree, these impulses have been accentuated by a rippling paranoia about criminal prosecutions. Ambivalent public backing for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the earlier open-ended nature of the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, contributed to this sense of vulnerability. Northern Ireland began to shut down space for critical debate from 2015, when the Public Prosecution Service launched proceedings against former soldier Dennis Hutchings for shooting dead John Patrick Cunningham in 1974. Since then, five other veterans have faced murder or manslaughter charges. So far, no case has resulted in a conviction. In September 2022, proceedings resumed against ‘Soldier F’ on two counts of murder and five counts of attempted murder for his actions on Bloody Sunday in January 1972. Prosecutors had previously decided to drop the case but were forced to carry on by victims’ families bringing a case to the High Court. Securing convictions fifty years after the events in question is no easy matter. Yet, these facts have not prevented veterans’ groups, tabloid newspapers, and MPs from loudly mobilising in protest (Sanders 2021). Yet, the correlation between vocal protest and public sentiment is less clear cut. A 2019 YouGov poll revealed, for example, that 42 per cent of people would support a law opposing the investigation or prosecution of armed forces troops and veterans over actions that took place in military action more than ten years ago (YouGov 2019).<sup>7</sup> As Edward Burke (2022) points out, the outrage surrounding these cases has undermined confidence in the justice system, as veterans claim the prosecutions are part of a Sinn Féin-directed witch hunt. This defensive reaction also prevents the army learning from past mistakes.

These campaigns for immunity for veterans for their actions in Northern Ireland are intimately connected to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the sense of a witch-hunt against soldiers has also been marked, notably with the 2003 Baha Mousa public inquiry (Bennett 2014), the Iraq Historic Allegations Team’s investigations (Rowe 2016), and the 2009–14 Al-Sweady inquiry. In the case of the latter, the dishonesty of lawyer, Phil Shiner, has strengthened the hand of those wishing to portray soldiers as victims beyond reproach. Taken together then, this tendency towards secrecy and obfuscation over Britain’s controversial history—whether through the withholding of documents or reticence towards criminal prosecutions—generates a ‘haunting past’; in essence, a ‘past that won’t go away’ (Lorenz 2010, 83), where ‘traces of ghosts’ disrupt the privileging of certain lives, narratives, and practices of statecraft (Auchter 2014). The traumatic nature of ‘historical wounds’ (Chakrabarty 2007) committed by the British state means that the past stays present, exerting a powerful brake on attempts to change in the future. The

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<sup>7</sup> On 6 September 2023, the UK House of Commons passed the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, which will stop new prosecutions and inquests being opened into killings on all sides of the conflict.

ghost ‘remembers’ while the state tries to forget (Auchter 2014). Or, as Avery Gordon (1997, xvi) puts it, the apparent ‘over-and-done-with comes alive’ with such hauntings ‘[altering] the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future’. Yet, despite these temporal imbrications, the suggestion that certain issues belong in the past (and that those alive bear no responsibility for their resolution) disrupts ideas of historical continuity, leading to a form of negation whereby the historical basis of claims for injustice are positioned as irrelevant to contemporary society (Kirkwood 2019; Sibley and Liu 2012).

These processes of occlusion matter for obvious reasons of scrutiny and accountability, and for the political and social interests they are intended to serve. The MoD, for example, felt sufficiently confident about the public accepting their narrative of brave soldiers hounded by the ‘human rights lobby’ to launch a pre-emptive social media attack on the BBC in July 2022. The day before BBC One aired a *Panorama* investigation into alleged murders committed by the Special Air Service in Afghanistan, the Ministry of Defence Press Office (2022) derided the programme that ‘jumps to unjustified conclusions from allegations that have already been fully investigated.’ Following media and parliamentary pressure, two weeks later the Secretary of State for Defence decided the allegations were credible enough to set up a judge-led inquiry.<sup>8</sup> A ‘culture of blanket secrecy’ shrouds the activities of the UK’s Special Forces (UKSF); the decision to deploy them often made without wide debate or public knowledge (Moran 2016; Saferworld 2022). Their legal status means they are not subject to the same degree of parliamentary oversight as other forces, their budget figures are not released, and they are not subject to Freedom of Information requests (Moran 2016; Pears 2022). With the UK’s defence policy predicated around ‘persistent engagement’, the lack of external oversight and scrutiny over UKSF has weakened democratic accountability, precluding any critical debate over their part in British defence and security strategy (Oxford Research Group 2020; Walpole and Karlshøj-Pedersen 2018).

UKSF’s limited accountability speaks to a more fundamental point, namely the hierarchies of power that such defensive attitudes seek to protect. Even in instances where the armed forces are seeking to take overt steps to deal with legacies of historic inequality, these steps are often taken to achieve the instrumental aim of attracting and retaining recruits from wider demographics within British society. If such a process can optimistically be described as ‘decolonisation’, it does little to change the fundamental reality that a commitment to an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ masculine ideal remains entrenched in military culture (King 2021, 458)—and that this ideal is buttressed by remembered pasts haunted by tales of British war-making told in overtly white, highly masculine terms. This point is well illustrated by the enduring marginalisation of female military personnel from sites of military heritage and commemoration. Despite women’s increasing presence in combat positions within the military, their presence remains under-represented within institutions that ‘convey messages of military service’ in the US and in other European cases (Szitanyi 2015, 253; Wendt 2023). Similar dynamics pertain within the UK, and manifest in

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<sup>8</sup> The inquiry’s terms of reference were published in December 2022 (see Ministry of Defence 2022).



activities such as the First World War centenary (Danilova and Dolan 2020) and the annual Poppy appeal which, as Victoria Basham (2016, 887) has argued reflect an ‘ongoing qualification and disqualification of women’s and ethnic minority bodies in and from military cultures, policies, practices, and relationships’.

These gendered and racial norms have been so firmly entrenched within society that it is even policed by those external to the military who seek to reject institutional efforts to affect change. The British Army’s recent series of recruitment advertisements, for example, which sought to depict the army as diverse, emotionally aware, and inclusive were subject to backlash by retired senior officers with the army accused of ‘kowtowing to “snowflakes”’ (Duell and Brown 2018; Falvey 2021). As Natalie Jester (2021, 69) argues, the ‘contestation of masculinity’ depicted in those advertisements is presented as somehow controversial. Indeed, as Andrew Roberts’ condemnation of the NAM revealed, laudable attempts to engage with the complexity of the past may not always meet with favour when such efforts challenge narratives that uphold existing hierarchies of power and social interest within the British state. Reactionary responses to museum galleries and accusations of ‘wokery’ towards military recruiting campaigns continue to reflect the fact that the armed forces sustain and reflect embedded social, political, and gendered hierarchies of power within British society. This reality was highlighted in May 2023 after whistle-blowers within the armed forces presented evidence to the UK House of Commons Defence Select Committee. Responding to these reports, Sarah Atherton MP—who authored a major report into women in the armed forces two years earlier<sup>9</sup>—saw them as evidence of ‘a wider culture of institutional misogyny’. She recommended tackling these issues ‘at a fundamental cultural level’ and called for ‘a considered and strategic response led by respected figures within the military’ (Defence Sub-Committee on Women in the Armed Forces 2023). Recruiting from more diverse constituencies may offer one means of addressing these historic discrepancies in terms of gender and race, yet they offer scant opportunity for meaningful reckoning with the power structures of the modern military state and their relation to continuing forms of imperial practice.

Existing measures of reform stop far short of asking more fundamental questions about hierarchies of social, military, and financial power within the British state and their relationship to neo-colonial practices. The nexus between these hierarchies and practices is best exemplified by the close association between UK Defence and the British arms industry. The British government has long sought to encourage arms exports (Phythian 1997), an approach that continues to invite controversy owing to ongoing trade with Saudi Arabia (Stavrianakis 2018) and other nations nominally under export restrictions due to human rights concerns. The destinations of such exports often correspond closely with the presence of UK loan service personnel, a link made explicit by the work of the Defence Equipment Sales Authority. Moreover, the UK profits

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<sup>9</sup> This report—‘Protecting those who protect us: Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life’—was published on 25 July 2021. <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/343/defence-subcommittee/news/156892/report-protecting-those-who-protect-us-women-in-the-armed-forces-from-recruitment-to-civilian-life/>

from educational and training relationships with the armed forces of numerous former colonies (Jones 2022). The training of Saudi Arabian pilots in the UK during the war in Yemen, for example, reached public and political attention when Lance Corporal Ahmed Al-Batati staged a public protest outside Downing Street. The case of Al-Batati is a compelling example of the enduring legacy of Britain's colonial military past: born in Yemen, he moved to the UK before joining the British Army. Learning about British arms sales and military training relationships with Saudi Arabia, a country engaged in a widely condemned war against Yemen, placed him in an impossible moral quandary which led him to stage a protest resulting in his arrest and discharge from the Army (Miller 2020).

These dynamics highlight the endurance of structures and practices of modern imperialism, and the imbrication of the British state and armed forces within them. As Anna Stavrianakis (2017, 566) notes, even the 'tone of engagement' between Britain and Saudi Arabia is one of 'ongoing post-imperial nostalgia for British influence and leverage'. Britain is undoubtedly not alone among western or European nations in prosecuting such practices, and its defence-industrial complex is dwarfed by that of the United States. Nevertheless, measures intended to widen the appeal of the armed forces to minority ethnic communities in the United Kingdom are inherently self-limiting if they do not also address the ways in which the British state perpetuates its military and arms-sale relationships with repressive states from which migrants to the UK may recently have departed.

### **Knowing war**

As the previous sections have shown, the UK Defence establishment goes to considerable lengths to influence and police the ways in which war and British war-making practices are understood. These processes are not exclusively a form of civil-military interaction concerned with social standing and political leverage, however. In this section, we turn to the ways that historical storytelling imbues the production of knowledge about war within the UK.

Claims to speak authoritative 'truth' about the character and conduct of war are a central justification for the armed forces' position within society (Antrobus and West 2022; Barkawi and Brighton 2013). Definitive claims to knowledge about past, present, and future war are commonplace in senior officers' speeches and doctrine publications. As the recent *Integrated Operating Concept* noted, 'Old distinctions between "peace" and "war", between "public" and "private", between "foreign" and "domestic" and between "state" and "non-state" are increasingly out of date' (Ministry of Defence 2020b, 5). On one level such claims can be read with a simple scepticism that reflects their rhetorical nature and political purpose. Scholarship on 'military imaginaries' has, however, highlighted the analytical value of interrogating these patterns of thought in greater depth to expose their political and military consequences (Lawson 2011; Öberg 2016).

In this respect, the notion of 'presentism' illuminates how instrumental attitudes to conflict—contemporary or historic—impoverishes the ways in which the UK armed forces intellectualise war. The imperative to conduct effective military operations defines the imaginary of all armed forces, and has fed

trends within much writing about war, namely ‘to conceive war in strategic terms, from the standpoint of rationality and interest’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 129). As Colin Gray (2014, 19) observed, ‘contemporary attitudes and opinions formed or reinforced by very recent experience’ therefore predominate. This emphasis upon the conduct of warfare, rather than the phenomenon of war itself, is reflected in the highly selective, transitory, and cyclical manner in which the armed forces engage with episodes of historic warfighting as part of their conceptual development processes. As David French (2011, 218) has observed, the British army has a ‘chequered history of gathering, analysing, and disseminating the lessons’ of its irregular warfare or other campaigns. Such failings are reflected more widely within the UK national security state. The willingness to accept the ‘illusion of success’ (Hargreaves 2022) provided by the execution of the Afghanistan evacuation was in marked contrast with the stubborn refusal to engage in a meaningful reckoning with a manifestly failed campaign (Defence Committee 2021).

The consequences of this outlook are complex. On the one hand, if the past has value only as a source of usable ‘lessons’ about warfare or as rhetorical flourishes to senior officers’ speeches, then its utility is minimal and it is readily ignored or dismissed. Yet, whether consciously or not, ideas and stories about the past impact upon the mental worlds of the armed forces and Defence establishment. Institutional mythologies about past wars, such as the over-optimistic accounts of Britain’s historic competence in counter-insurgency campaigns that developed after the 2003 invasion of Iraq do shape policy and guide operations (Porter 2010). Moreover, as Gray argues, specific and often limited readings of contemporary history can exercise a dominant role in shaping policy and doctrine. Gray is surely right to label these dynamics as ‘presentist’, although he stops short of exploring how historical approaches to ‘presentism’ may illuminate his point. Shorn of any effort to understand contemporary war in historical terms, such ‘presentist’ understandings often fall into the fallacy of assuming ‘a one-to-one correspondence between “the fantasy of a stable past” and the “fantasy of a stable present”’ (Steinmetz-Jenkins 2023, 564). Assumptions are made about the stability and determined nature of the present and near future, without adequately acknowledging the contingency of such observations. This approach is particularly problematic when dealing with the non-linear and paradoxical nature of war, and can produce highly subjective—even fictitious—readings of the recent past and the ‘history of now’ (Steinmetz-Jenkins 2023). One can thus conceive of military thought as being trapped within Hartog’s concept of a ‘monstrous present’, in which it becomes conceptually impossible to conceive of past, present, or future outside of the immediate concerns of a misleadingly concrete ‘now’. These processes of presentism and their implications can be seen in the way that the UK Defence establishment conceptualised and responded to the Russian seizure of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine after 2014. Here stories about Russian forms of political warfare came to preoccupy discussion and to enjoy a prominent place in doctrine and force design in a particularly rapid and impactful manner, despite their manifestly contestable nature.

In 2014 the British Army was engaged in ‘returning to contingency’ in the wake of the end of major combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, a process which saw it divest itself of counter-insurgency-era capabilities and structures

in favour of a greater emphasis on armour and manoeuvre—themes enshrined in the Army's *JCN 2/12 Future Land Operating Concept* (Ministry of Defence 2012). Initially, Russia's attack on Ukraine fed into this narrative and was interpreted through the prism of great power conflict—a form of war that would apparently require Britain to develop and sustain traditional measures of conventional military power such as divisional-level military formations. Quickly thereafter, however, senior leaders began to signal that their diagnosis of Russian actions suggested that a new character of conflict, dominated by 'information', had arrived (Morgan-Owen and Gould 2022). This apparently new form of conflict—which General Sir Nick Carter, then Chief of the Defence Staff, described in 2019 as 'authoritarian political warfare'—was defined by 'information operations, espionage, assassinations, cyber, the theft of intellectual property, economic inducement, the utilisation of proxies and deniable paramilitary forces' in addition to 'old fashioned military coercion' (Carter 2019). These ways of *conducting* war have been 'othered' and seen as distinctive features of current adversary thinking. Efforts to combat them imbue new British doctrinal and conceptual publications, such as the *Integrated Operating Concept*, have underpinned justifications for ongoing reductions to the size of the British Army, and led to reduced investment in so-called 'sunset capabilities' such as main battle tanks (Morgan-Owen and Gould 2022). Prime Minister Boris Johnson summed this argument up, dismissively claiming that 'We have to recognise that the old concepts of fighting big tank battles on European land mass are over, and there are other, better things we should be investing in... this is how warfare in the future is going to be' (Liaison Committee 2021, Qq 147–148).

Yet, research on Russian operations and capabilities fundamentally challenged many aspects of this narrative. The coherence and integration of Russian 'information' and other operations into a singular 'Gerasimov doctrine' proved illusory, and the important distinctions in context, intent, and outcome of Russian incursions into Crimea and Eastern Ukraine were easily overlooked (Freedman 2022; Galeotti 2019). A myth of Putin and his military commanders as 'master strategists' grew up (Freedman 2019), fed by what amounted to stories about contemporary history. Such narratives underpinned arguments about the risk of antagonising Russia by responding to its aggression, and led many analysts to assume that the Russian military would secure a quick victory in February/March 2022 (Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg 2022). Yet such assessments, which have exerted a powerful influence over British military thought and debate, proved deeply misguided.

Whilst it would be misleading to draw deterministic conclusions from Russian military performance and to extrapolate from them to consider the potential outcome of a Russia–NATO conflict, the central point here is one about the basis on which the threat was constructed and understood. The Army's own internal think-tank—the Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research (CHACR), established by Carter in 2016—has been at pains to point out that the narrative about historic war that has underpinned the Army's preoccupation with 'hybrid' or 'grey zone' conflict since 2015 rests upon foundations of sand. One report identified an 'institutional intellectual issue' that had created a delta between 'gown and green' in terms of understanding political warfare—and obfuscated Britain's own long history of

operating in this manner (Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research 2020). Others have taken this argument further, highlighting that the entire conceptual framing of ‘hybrid’ or ‘grey zone’ war is fundamentally flawed in theoretical terms, offering neither a convincing historical nor intellectual basis for its arguments (Stoker and Whiteside 2020). Presentist concerns led to a focus upon *how* particular operations were *conducted*, with insufficient consideration to the political and social contexts that may have informed their outcomes. These *methods* were then elevated into a ‘way’ of war, against which the UK’s own military concepts and defence policy were shaped.

The notion that historians have a part to play in generating knowledge of possible relevance to Defence has proven controversial (Wagner 2017). To be sure, the imperatives of generating instrumental knowledge about warfare have historically proven a barrier to the integration of aspects of the military history sub-field into the broader discipline of History. Yet offering historical perspective on conflict to the armed forces is not the same as distorting research to instrumental ends (Guldi and Armitage 2014, 14–37). Indeed, we contend that presentism offers historians an important tool through which to challenge entrenched hierarchies of social and political power that dominate the development and use of military force in the UK, and a means by which to disrupt patterns of military thought that remain rooted in established doctrinal or cultural conventions. The value of thinking historically in this manner has already been well-established. Tarak Barkawi has demonstrated that de-colonial approaches to war need not be confined to questions of diversity and recruiting—important though those measures are—but can offer a transformational agenda for British defence and security policy’s intellectual underpinnings (Barkawi 2016; Barkawi and Brighton 2013). Hew Strachan has defined the field in demonstrating the past’s utility in deepening our appreciation of changes in contemporary conflict, particularly in the field of strategy. Antoine Bousquet’s (2009) arguments about ‘chaosplexic warfare’ have also highlighted the role of the past as a means of understanding change, and of destabilising military hierarchies reflective of the requirement of past wars, rather than of the present day. In this sense, presentism offers a means of analysing and problematising the ‘politics of time’ (Lorenz 2010, 94), acknowledging contested and limiting temporal demarcations, such as ‘old’ and ‘new’, ‘timely’ and ‘untimely’, ‘industrial age’ and ‘information age’.

## Conclusion

The history of a state’s military past is not something that can be avoided. Whether politicians and military personnel wish to think in historical terms or not, the past occupies a ubiquitous presence in the lived spaces, daily routines, and mentalities of defence establishments and armed forces across the world. In this article, we have sought to develop a typology of the ways in which Western liberal states shape and mobilise historical fictions within their distinctive forms of militarism and civil-military relations, focusing on the United Kingdom. Drawing on the recent return to ‘presentism’ as a framing for historical enquiry, we posit a tripartite categorisation: first, ‘Telling Stories’—the multifaceted ways the state curates and re-enforces public understandings of military power and thereby participates in processes of militarisation/civil-

military relations; secondly, 'Hiding Pasts'—the ways in which the state polices what can be known and researched about its military past and the relationship of those omissions to enduring hierarchies of thought and action; and finally, 'Knowing War'—how knowledge about war is produced within and around the state's armed forces, and the stories that inform that process. In mapping these issues we consciously sought to explore them in breadth, with a view to highlighting both the ubiquity of stories about the past within the UK state and its defence establishment and the scope for further work in this area—both within the UK and in broader comparative contexts. As such our conclusions are more suggestive than definitive, but nevertheless offer a conceptual and methodological departure point for further research in this area.

Fundamentally, we argue that defence establishments use museums, ceremony, and other public activities to engage in a form of political communication about the utility of military force within society. In a democratic context, these activities ought to be seen as a form of civil-military relations with political ends—whether in terms of recruiting, public support, or political leverage. In the UK, Defence also seeks to police what histories can be told about it, in part due to the endurance of entrenched ideas of gender, race, and imperialism within the British security state. In the case of the armed forces, despite their overt and instrumental focus on 'relevance', narrow and highly selective views of the past limit their conceptual horizons and impede the production of new knowledge about war. What unites these areas is the interplay between the government, armed forces, and society—a trinitarian relationship that is shaped, in part, by stories about how the British state has, does, or should make war. Stories about the past exist within each element of this trinity, while also serving to adjust the relationship between them: particularly in terms of civil-military relations and the need to legitimise the recourse to force in a democratic society.

We argue that these stories need renewal to reflect better the changing nature of modern British society and the security context in which it operates (Barkawi and Brighton 2013). Anxieties about telling the 'right' story are deeply ironic as the history of British war-making—and the deep ties it has left between Britain and numerous areas and peoples across the world—present significant opportunities for a thorough reckoning with Britain's multicultural present. It offers a way for the past to be used with the present in mind, providing a flexible means through which 'experienced injustices' may help to 'combat those taking place today' (Todorov 2001, 20). Far from being a political pitfall to avoid, such a reckoning offers the scope to produce meaningful changes to the British state's capacity to conceptualise war and to make strategy (Barkawi and Brighton 2013). By democratising and diversifying its engagement with the past, Defence can thus make meaningful and productive links between the stories it tells and the challenges it seeks to face in the present.

### **Disclosure statement**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.



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