

How Britain/America/NATO wage war

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The military has created a wall of silence around its frequent resort to barbaric practices, including torture, and goes out of its way to avoid legal scrutiny.



Five photographs together break a silence. The first is of a former Gurkha regimental sergeant major, Tul Bahadur Pun, aged 87. He sits in a wheelchair outside 10 Downing Street. He holds a board full of medals, including the Victoria Cross, the highest award for bravery, which he won serving in the British army.

He has been refused entry to Britain and treatment for a serious heart ailment by the National Health Service: outrages rescinded only after a public campaign. On 25 June, he came to Downing Street to hand his Victoria Cross back to the Prime Minister, but Gordon Brown refused to see him.

The second photograph is of a 12-year-old boy, one of three children. They are Kuchis, nomads of Afghanistan. They have been hit by Nato bombs, American or British, and nurses are trying to peel away their roasted skin with tweezers. On the night of 10 June, Nato planes struck again, killing at least 30 civilians in a single village: children, women, schoolteachers, students. On 4 July, another 22 civilians died like this. All, including the roasted children, are described as "militants" or "suspected Taliban". The Defence Secretary, Des Browne, says the invasion of Afghanistan is "the noble cause of the 21st century".

The third photograph is of a computer-generated aircraft carrier not yet built, one of two of the biggest ships ever ordered for the Royal Navy. The £4bn contract is shared by BAE Systems, whose sale of 72 fighter jets to the corrupt tyranny in Saudi Arabia has made Britain the biggest arms merchant on earth, selling mostly to oppressive regimes in poor countries. At a time of economic crisis, Browne describes the carriers as "an affordable expenditure".

The fourth photograph is of a young British soldier, Gavin Williams, who was "beasted" to death by three non-commissioned officers. This "informal summary punishment", which sent his body temperature to more than 41 degrees, was intended to "humiliate, push to the limit and hurt". The torture was described in court as a fact of army life.

The final photograph is of an Iraqi man, Baha Mousa, who was tortured to death by British soldiers. Taken during his post-mortem, it shows some of the 93 horrific injuries he suffered at the hands of

men of the Queen's Lancashire Regiment who beat and abused him for 36 hours, including double-hooding him with hessian sacks in stifling heat. He was a hotel receptionist. Although his murder took place almost five years ago, it was only in May this year that the Ministry of Defence responded to the courts and agreed to an independent inquiry. A judge has described this as a "wall of silence".

A court martial convicted just one soldier of Mousa's "inhumane treatment", and he has since been quietly released. Phil Shiner of Public Interest Lawyers, representing the families of Iraqis who have died in British custody, says the evidence is clear - abuse and torture by the British army is systemic.

Shiner and his colleagues have witness statements and corroborations of prima facie crimes of an especially atrocious kind usually associated with the Americans. "The more cases I am dealing with, the worse it gets," he says. These include an "incident" near the town of Majar al-Kabir in 2004, when British soldiers executed as many as 20 Iraqi prisoners after mutilating them. The latest is that of a 14-year-old boy who was forced to simulate anal and oral sex over a prolonged period.

"At the heart of the US and UK project," says Shiner, "is a desire to avoid accountability for what they want to do. Guantanamo Bay and extraordinary renditions are part of the same struggle to avoid accountability through jurisdiction." British soldiers, he says, use the same torture techniques as the Americans and deny that the European Convention on Human Rights, the Human Rights Act and the UN Convention on Torture apply to them. And British torture is "commonplace": so much so, that "the routine nature of this ill-treatment helps to explain why, despite the abuse of the soldiers and cries of the detainees being clearly audible, nobody, particularly in authority, took any notice".

Arcane rituals

Unbelievably, says Shiner, the Ministry of Defence under Tony Blair decided that the 1972 Heath government's ban on certain torture techniques applied only in the UK and Northern Ireland. Consequently, "many Iraqis were killed and tortured in UK detention facilities". Shiner is working on 46 horrific cases.

A wall of silence has always surrounded the British military, its arcane rituals, rites and practices and, above all, its contempt for the law and natural justice in its various imperial pursuits. For 80 years, the Ministry of Defence and compliant ministers refused to countenance posthumous pardons for terrified boys shot at dawn during the slaughter of the First World War. British soldiers used as guinea pigs during the testing of nuclear weapons in the Indian Ocean were abandoned, as were many others who suffered the toxic effects of the 1991 Gulf War. The treatment of Gurkha Tul Bahadur Pun is typical. Having been sent back to Nepal, many of these "soldiers of the Queen" have no pension, are deeply impoverished and are refused residence or medical help in the country for which they fought and for which 43,000 of them have died or been injured. The Gurkhas have won no fewer than 26 Victoria Crosses, yet Browne's "affordable expenditure" excludes them.

An even more imposing wall of silence ensures that the British public remains largely unaware of the industrial killing of civilians in Britain's modern colonial wars. In his landmark work *Unpeople: Britain's Secret Human Rights Abuses*, the historian Mark Curtis uses three main categories: direct responsibility, indirect responsibility and active inaction.

"The overall figure [since 1945] is between 8.6 and 13.5 million," Curtis writes. "Of these, Britain bears direct responsibility for between four million and six million deaths. This figure is, if anything, likely to be an underestimate. Not all British interventions have been included, because of lack of data." Since his study was published, the Iraq death toll has reached, by reliable measure, a million men, women and children.

The spiralling rise of militarism within Britain is rarely acknowledged, even by those alerting the public to legislation attacking basic civil liberties, such as the recently drafted Data Communications Bill, which will give the government powers to keep records of all electronic communication. Like the plans for identity cards, this is in keeping with what the Americans call "the national security state", which seeks the control of domestic dissent while pursuing military aggression abroad. The £4bn aircraft carriers are to have a "global role". For global read colonial. The Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office follow Washington's line almost to the letter, as in Browne's preposterous description of Afghanistan as a noble cause. In reality, the US-inspired Nato invasion has had two effects: the killing and dispossession of large numbers of Afghans, and the return of the opium trade, which the Taliban had banned. According to Hamid Karzai, the west's puppet leader, Britain's role in Helmand Province has led directly to the return of the Taliban.

Loans for arms

The militarising of how the British state perceives and treats other societies is vividly demonstrated in Africa, where ten out of 14 of the most impoverished and conflict-ridden countries are seduced into buying British arms and military equipment with "soft loans". Like the British royal family, the British Prime Minister simply follows the money. Having ritually condemned a despot in Zimbabwe for "human rights abuses" - in truth, for no longer serving as the west's business agent - and having obeyed the latest US dictum on Iran and Iraq, Brown set off recently for Saudi Arabia, exporter of Wahhabi fundamentalism and wheeler of fabulous arms deals.

To complement this, the Brown government is spending £11bn of taxpayers' money on a huge, privatised military academy in Wales, which will train foreign soldiers and mercenaries recruited to the bogus "war on terror". With arms companies such as Raytheon profiting, this will become Britain's "School of the Americas", a centre for counter-insurgency (terrorist) training and the design of future colonial adventures.

It has had almost no publicity.

Of course, the image of militarist Britain clashes with a benign national regard formed, wrote Tolstoy, "from infancy, by every possible means - class books, church services, sermons, speeches, books, papers, songs, poetry, monuments [leading to] people stupefied in the one direction". Much has changed since he wrote that. Or has it? The shabby, destructive colonial war in Afghanistan is now reported almost entirely through the British army, with squaddies always doing their Kipling best, and with the Afghan resistance routinely dismissed as "outsiders" and "invaders". Pictures of nomadic boys with Nato-roasted skin almost never appear in the press or on television, nor the after-effects of British thermobaric weapons, or "vacuum bombs", designed to suck the air out of human lungs. Instead, whole pages mourn a British military intelligence agent in Afghanistan, because she happens to have been a 26-year-old woman, the first to die in active service since the 2001 invasion.

Baha Mousa, tortured to death by British soldiers, was also 26 years old. But he was different. His father, Daoud, says that the way the Ministry of Defence has behaved over his son's death convinces him that the British government regards the lives of others as "cheap". And he is right.

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