

Ministry of Defence Decides to Declassify War Histories

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Setting a clear timeline for compilation, publication, archiving and declassification of the histories of India's wars and operations, the Ministry of Defence has come out with a new policy which stipulates that events must be officially recorded within five years. The declassification of India's military history should also lead to building on successes and avoiding past follies

In news: Unlocking war histories with a purpose

Placing it in syllabus: History

Dimensions

- What are war histories?
- Global Practice of Declassification and Reasons for it
- Challenges involved
- Suggestions

Content:

What are war histories?

- War Histories are an account of wars that include material related to military strategic decision making, operational analyses, leadership etc
- They give an accurate account of events, authentic material for academic research, and help counter rumours.

Details of the new policy:

- According to the policy, records should ordinarily be declassified in 25 years. Records older than 25 years should be appraised by archival experts and transferred

to the National Archives of India once the war/operations histories have been compiled.

- The policy mandates the constitution of a committee headed by Joint Secretary, MoD and comprising representatives of the Services, Ministry of External Affairs, Home Ministry and other organisations along with prominent military historians for the compilation of war/operation histories
- The policy also sets clear timelines with regard to the compilation and publication of war histories. The committee should be formed within two years of completion of war or operation. The war operation histories will be compiled within five years.
- The responsibility for declassification of records rests with the respective organisations as specified in the Public Record Act, 1993 and Public Record Rules, 1997, as amended from time to time.
- The government will, however, continue to have discretionary power over withholding records it deems sensitive – one such example is the Henderson Brooks-Bhagat report.

Global Practice of Declassification and Reasons for it:

- Declassification is the process of lifting the restrictions placed on documents classified as secret.
- It is often carried out under the principle of freedom of information. Procedures for declassification vary by country.
- Papers may be withheld without being classified as secret, and eventually made available.
- In the USA, Executive Order 13526 establishes the mechanisms for most declassifications, within the laws passed by Congress. The originating agency assigns a declassification date, by default 10 years. After 25 years, declassification review is automatic with nine

narrow exceptions that allow information to remain as classified.

- A similar procedure is established in the United Kingdom under the Official Secrets Act 1989 .

Reasons for it

- offer researchers, analysts and historians an easy lens into studying military operations
- Gives opportunity to analyse lessons learnt and prevent future mistakes.
- Provides authentic material for academic research by researchers, analysts and historians into studying military operations
- It also help counter rumours
- release of formerly classified national security information to the general public and researchers, enhances their knowledge of the democratic institutions and history

The requirement of having war histories written with a clear cut policy on declassification of war records was recommended by the **Kargil Review Committee, headed by K Subrahmanyam**, as well as **N N Vohra Committee** in order to analyse lessons learnt and prevent future mistakes.

Post the Kargil war of 1999, recommendations on national security also mentioned the desirability of authoritative war history.

Challenges involved

The conversion of the policy into deliverables will be a tough and unglamorous grind. The biggest challenges facing this initiative will be:

- The government does not have a uniform system for classifying, safeguarding and declassifying national security related information.

- When information is generated in huge volumes, separating wheat from chaff is the key issue. If you have too many secrets floating around, the chances are some will spill out.
- It is difficult to trace files from eras gone, it is also highly possible that in the absence of digital conversion, several priceless discussions have been destroyed in the periodic discarding of files.
- Even if such files are available, long hours have to be spent trying to identify elements that remain historically relevant.
- Though digitisation and creation of oral histories will form a critical component of this transformation, both of them are either unfolding at a snail's pace or are absent in our existing official repositories of history at the service headquarters or war colleges.
- the fusion of political directives and strategic decision making with the operational and tactical happenings on ground;
- compilation and reconciling and analysis of events at multiple levels (headquarters, commands and field formations);
- putting together a team of dedicated researchers and historians with a mix of academics and practitioners with access to records and files;
- putting together a concurrent oral history and digitization of all archival compilations associated with this initiative.

Suggestions:

- Government needs to set up classification standards and levels of classification, and categorise the classification authority, duration of classification and the process of declassification or downgrading the classification of a document in clear terms.
- There is a need for an automated process through which

documents get downgraded every five years, till they are declassified at 25.

- Any decision not to automatically downgrade a document should be taken by a small committee and they should record their reasons in writing so that the decision can be reviewed again later.
- The government can begin involving retired officers to aid the process of declassification. Their expertise and domain knowledge would ease the process considerably.
- Also an outreach must be made to individual historians, think tanks and global repositories to share their oral history collections on contemporary Indian military history.

Mould your thought: Why is declassifying war histories important? What are the challenges faced in India regarding declassification of such histories? Suggest measures to remedy these issues.

Approach to the answer:

- Introduction – define war histories
- Give reasons for declassifying war histories
- Discuss the challenges in declassifying information in India
- Mention the possible solutions
- Conclusion