

Britain's Secret Wars
How and Why the United Kingdom sponsors conflict
around the world

T. J. Coles

Clairview Books: Russet, West Sussex, £14.99, p/b

Coles has written a couple of essays for this journal and they show what a formidable research tool the Internet is if you have the patience and the skill to use it.¹ With this book Coles uses the same techniques to explore.... well, not really secret wars so much as barely reported foreign policy events: military training missions, weapons sales, intelligence operations and attempts to manipulate other (relatively minor) countries in the interests of either – take your pick – multinationals or the global free trade agenda.

Coles' opening chapter surveys some official and semi-official (e.g. Chatham House) statements of what British foreign policy is or should be: roughly, helping multinationals to get their hands on the world's resources because it's good for us, good for the developing world and good for them (but don't tell the voters, they might not like the grubby details). As globalisation by multinationals is now the only approved form of development, we have the bizarre situation in which the Department for International Development (DfID) is fronting and cheerleading for the companies which are destroying the planet so we can have cheap white goods and a new mobile phone every year.

But this being declining Britain, a lot of this is pretty small beer. He tells us that there are eleven members in the British Military Mission to Saudi Arabia and in 2010 the UK exported £250,000 worth of small-scale munitions to Yemen. By contrast the Americans are training about 200,000 foreign soldiers and police a year² and:

'In the first five years of the Obama administration, the US government entered into formal agreements with the

1 <<http://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster64/lob64-chemtrails.pdf>> and <<http://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster62/lob62-weather-wars.pdf>>

2 <<https://theintercept.com/2016/07/13/training/>>

GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] to transfer over \$64 billion in arms and defense services, with Saudi Arabia receiving at least three-quarters...' ³

Coles tells us that the Sri Lankan defence budget was some £2 billion a year in 2012 and in the same paragraph that the UK exported 'nearly £1 million-worth' of small arms to Sri Lanka in 2010. (p. 103). £1 million is a drop in Sri Lanka's military budget let alone that of the US.⁴

Some of the chapters are straightforward and readily intelligible; others are not. As you might expect it is in the Middle East and Libya where things get complicated and I occasionally found the narrative hard to follow (probably because of the difficulty I have with pronouncing and remembering Arabic names).

Some of the story is familiar: SIS helping to create Al Qaeda (trying to use Jihadis) and creating an armed opposition to Gaddafi in Libya (trying to use Jihadis). We can see how well those turned out. Other bits of it are not: did you know the Brits were meddling – alternatively: spreading democracy and development – in Papua New Guinea, Somalia and Bangladesh?

The plain facts are striking enough but Coles can't occasionally resist bigging them up. Grace Livingstone – a journalist and a good one – becomes 'scholar Grace Livingstone'. Early Day Motions in the House of Commons, which are expressions of MPs' opinions and mean little, become 'the British Parliament'. Scratching around for evidence, a couple of times he cites stories in the *Daily Star*, which is hardly a reliable source. Neither, in my view is, is former LaRouchie William Engdahl.

The major fault with the book is a kind of certainty of tone. For example, of the civil war in Sri Lanka he writes at one point:

'It was clear that the [Tamil] Tigers had served their

³ <<http://qz.com/677087/the-bloody-consequences-of-us-hypocrisy-are-on-full-display-in-yemen>>

⁴ See for example <http://www.salon.com/2013/05/14/where_does_all_our_military_spending_go_partner/>.

purpose and that the World Bank and the IMF wanted a return on their investments.’ (p. 102)

Which presumes a great deal which he does not really establish.

Nonetheless, even with my caveats this is an interesting survey of what can be discovered about secret and semi-secret British operations abroad. Britain hardly matters in the world except as the host to international banks, and when it does get to play a significant role, such as in Libya, it is only doing so at the behest of the Americans. (The relationship with America is under explored here.) It would have been better with the data, such as it is, presented straight rather than editorialised from a left position. But who else is doing such work? Mark Curtis, I suppose. And it comes with endorsements on the front cover from Noam Chomsky and John Pilger.

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