

*British Counterinsurgency*

John Newsinger

London: PalgraveMacmillan, 2015, p/b, £18.99

This is a new edition of *British Counterinsurgency*, first published in 2002. Here's what I wrote about the first edition in *Lobster* 44.

'To my knowledge this is the first account of Britain's post-1945 colonial wars written from a radical left standpoint. By which I don't mean that it is a load of left rhetoric – that is entirely absent; but the *assumptions* about legitimacy and right are on the side of those who were fighting this country's state forces. Lefties don't pussyfoot around; imperialism is imperialism; and they look the facts in the face. Facts like the number of dead. Here's your reality-checking question: how many people do you think the British state killed in Kenya during the Mau-Mau uprising? 1000, 5000? 10,000? 20,000? The *official* figure is 11,000 – but who believes official death figures? Newsinger tells us some estimates put it as high as 50,000, with only 593 deaths on the British state's side, of which only 63 were white. It was less a war than a slaughter; and the RAF dropped napalm.

Presented in chronological order, the procession of wars – Palestine, Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, South Yemen, Oman, Dofar (Dofar?) and Northern Ireland – nicely illustrates the decline of the British empire. Twenty years after the big wars of the early 1950s, we're down to SAS skirmishes in minor bits of the Middle East.

It's a difficult trick, producing a synthesis of subjects as large as, say, the war in Kenya, in 20-30 pages, without it feeling sketchy; but Newsinger pulls it off. I'm not a specialist in this field and this kind of brisk, assertive account, with lots of documentation if I chose to pursue it, is what I want.'

Since the 2002 edition Newsinger has added a chapter on Iraq, another devastating account of the self-delusion and staggering incompetence of the Americans and futility on the

part of the British Army, which suffered nearly two hundred deaths and three and half thousand injuries in Iraq to no military purpose at all. They were almost literally sacrificed – Tony Blair’s ‘blood price’ – in pursuit of the British state’s fantasies about ‘the special relationship’.<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of that disastrous campaign, we heard a fair bit of comment that the Americans should have listened to the Brits because the British state – its military and intelligence – is good at counterinsurgency.<sup>2</sup> Newsinger’s account of British CI campaigns since 1945 shows that this is a delusion. With the exception of a couple of minor events in the Middle East in which handfuls of SAS soldiers helped put down uprisings, British CI had only one post-war success, in Malaya; and there only because they were able to exploit ethnic divisions between the Chinese insurgents and the rest of the population, and were far enough away from Fleet St. for their atrocities to go unreported. All the rest of the campaigns were failures, with the status quo eventually being overthrown in one way or another.

*Robin Ramsay*

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1 See <[news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_politics/2239887.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_politics/2239887.stm)>.

2 This is a variation on the recurring theme during Britain’s post-WW2 military decline that the relationship between the British and the Americans is analogous to that between the Romans and the Greeks: big, powerful but clumsy Yanks and slighter but more sophisticated Brits.