

*Creating Chaos*  
*Covert Political Warfare, from Truman to Putin*

Larry Hancock

London and New York: OR Books, 2018, £13.00, p/b <sup>1</sup>

**Robin Ramsay**

**H**ancock is an interesting figure. To me he is one of the very good JFK researchers. His *Someone Would Have Talked* <sup>2</sup> would be on my list of serious JFK assassination books. On his blog<sup>3</sup> he begins his self-description thus: 'Hancock is a leading historian-researcher in the JFK assassination.' On the OR books website his interest in JFK is missing and he begins with this:

'Larry Hancock brings formal training in history and cultural anthropology to his research and writing on Cold War history and national security subjects. Following service in the U.S. Air Force, his career in computer/communications and technology marketing allowed him to become a consultant on strategic analysis and planning studies.'<sup>4</sup>

Hancock is a man of broad interests and knowledge, as both this new book – his seventh – and his website<sup>5</sup> show. Many years ago I acquired the bad habit of folding down the corner of a book's page if there was something noteworthy on it. I folded down many pages reading this.

As the title suggests, this is a survey of American and Soviet/Russian covert operations since WW2. Hancock notes early on:

'Some readers may be surprised to find that it was the United States, rather than Russia, which most frequently turned to major covert political action projects during the Cold War.' (p. 3)

And the first half of the book is mostly about the CIA's operations against what the Agency in particular and the America political class generally believed – or

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.orbooks.com/catalogue/creating-chaos-by-larry-hancock/>>

<sup>2</sup> Roanoke (Texas): JFK Lancer Productions and Publications, 2006

<sup>3</sup> <<https://larryhancock.wordpress.com/>>

<sup>4</sup> <<https://www.orbooks.com/larry-hancock>>

<sup>5</sup> <[www.larry-hancock.com](http://www.larry-hancock.com)>

pretended to believe – to be the Soviet ‘threat’.<sup>6</sup> But, as he puts it:

‘. . . beginning with the Truman administration there was little or no American appreciation of the equal or greater impact of anti-colonialism, nationalism and the simple rejection of Western cultural dominance. The reality was that the rapid collapse of the existing colonial empires was rooted not in an all-powerful world communist ideological expansion but rather in what was a unique opportunity for nationalist and even local ethnic movements.’ (pp. 92/3)

Hancock doesn’t discuss how genuine the Americans’ supposed fear of the Soviet ‘threat’ was. Did those smart people in the CIA really believe the Soviets were behind all the anti-American struggles in the Latin American banana republics? I doubt it; but it was a handy pretext for attacking anyone who threatened American corporate interests in the region.

Later in the book he writes:

‘American covert political warfare had been conducted as an effort to check the expansion of the Soviet Union’s political and military influence. In terms of ideology and public emotion it was justified as a response to the existential threat of worldwide communism. In retrospect, it appears to have been fundamentally an attempt to maintain the pre-war status quo, which included the political and economic hegemony of the former global imperial powers, including the United States.’ (p. 179)

Which is a rather convoluted way of describing American imperialism and dollar diplomacy, and might be said to imply a deal of cynicism. It also omits the fact that the expanding post-WW2 American empire was encroaching on, and sometimes displacing, the existing empires of the UK and France. But I’m being picky: the fact that he omits UK activities in the period (for example those of the Information Research Department [IRD]) is not surprising – even though they sometimes worked with the American efforts, for example in Indonesia in the sixties. In 330 pages Hancock can’t deal with everything and the book is chiefly aimed at an American audience: one not familiar with Philip Agee,<sup>7</sup> the magazine he founded, *Covert Action Information Bulletin*,<sup>8</sup> and

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<sup>6</sup> There is some material on Soviet operations, but what he offers is slight. Most known Soviet psy-ops in NATO countries were feeble.

<sup>7</sup> Agee’s *CIA Diary: Inside the Company* is on-line at <<https://tinyurl.com/y86pplvn>> or <<https://leaksource.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/inside-the-company-cia-diary-philip-agee.pdf>>.

<sup>8</sup> Some issues are now available at <<https://tinyurl.com/yckwmucb>> or <<https://archive.org/details/Issue27CovertActionInformationBulletinIssue27ReligiousRight>>.

William Blum,<sup>9</sup> who were documenting all this over 40 years ago.

The survey of US covert ops he offers will be familiar to anyone who has looked at Agee, Blum *et al*, but many of the sources won't be. There is a huge amount of information available now that wasn't there in the 1970s and I enjoyed revisiting this material, much of which I had forgotten.

But it's the second half of the book, dealing with the post '89 period, which was of particular interest to me. Hancock has the confidence to describe and explain the behaviour of the post-Soviet Russian state and, in particular, its use of covert operations. He present this in a framework in which the Russian state, especially in the 21st century, did things similar to what the American state had done after WW2.

'The great irony of the twenty-first century was that, beginning in 2004, the Russian Federation would adopt the same pattern of response in its own foreign relations, pushing back against perceived political and economic threats to its own sphere of influence. The trigger would be a series of open popular elections, mass protests and regime change in adjacent republics known as the colour revolutions – the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004) and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005). In response Russia turned to the same series of active measures and deniable surrogate warfare that the United States had used during the Cold War. The consequences would be . . . predictable.' (p. 203)

Hancock then asks if, in seeing the 'colour revolutions' as American operations, were the Russians making the same mistake about American influence that the Americans made in the 50s and 60s about the Soviet 'threat'? He seems to me to get the balance about right: yes, the American-funded NGOs operating within the Russian Federation – with or without the alleged covert CIA influence – were a direct threat to the Russian regime. And were so intended. It is simply a fact that the Americans/NATO sought to detach some of the new republics bordering Russia from its sphere of influence. Ukraine was seeking to join the EU; and, eventually, no doubt, would have sought membership of NATO. The messy and still unresolved conflicts in Ukraine and Moldova were the result of the Americans/NATO challenging the Russians' 'sphere of influence'.

After the 'colour' events the Russians decided that they were engaged in a renewed conflict with the Americans/NATO. They began upgrading their nuclear weapons and used the Internet to attack countries close to them:

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<sup>9</sup> <<https://williamblum.org>>

Estonia, the Ukraine and Lithuania all received cyber attacks on their Net-dependent infrastructure. They also began the social media activities – fake news and influence operations – which have attracted so much attention since the election of Donald Trump. Although there are sections of the British and American left which remain sceptical of these,<sup>10</sup> Hancock seems to me to marshal enough evidence to call the case proven.

Russia has a state-controlled Internet and as long as the West does not, and relies on the social media companies to police themselves (which, with hundreds of millions of users, is an almost impossible job, anyway) – the Russians are going to continue stirring the pot. Hancock states:

‘It is hard to deny the ongoing information warfare campaigns have produced some degree of both social fragmentations and political destabilisation with the United States, Great Britain, Spain, and within the EU nations as a whole.’ (p. 321)

‘Some degree’, yes, a but a long way short of significant just yet. Divisions can only be amplified, not created, by the Russian trolls and bots. There is no evidence yet that Russian operations had any significant effect on the election of Trump, or the ‘leave’ vote during the EU membership referendum in the UK. (Though, having written, that I’m not sure what such evidence would look like . . . .)

In my first draft of this I wrote that today’s Russia is a new phenomenon: a nuclear-armed, nationalistic kleptocracy. But that pretty much describes Trump’s vision of America, too, doesn’t it? Which may explain the empathy between some in the Trump and Putin camps. How this issue is going to be managed in today’s globalised world, I have no idea. Sadly, as far as I can see, neither do the people entrusted with managing ‘national security’. There will be many other books about the political problems the virtually unregulated Internet is generating for the Western democracies but few will present the historical background as honestly and fairly as Hancock has done.

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<sup>10</sup> For example some of those writing at <consortiumnews.com>. Try Diana Johnstone at <<https://consortiumnews.com/2018/08/27/the-real-russian-interference-in-us-politics/>>.

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