

Disrupt and Deny
Spies, Special Forces, and the Secret Pursuit of British Foreign Policy
Rory Cormac
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Robin Ramsay

First things first: this is very good and anyone interested in our secret services, post-WW2 British history, or British colonial history, let alone the actual subject matter implied by the title, will find much material of use or interest. The obvious caveat I have to make is that this is not a field I have done much reading in recently. However my opinion of its value is shared by some senior academics who are quoted on the book's cover. This is big stuff.

We have come a long way from the early days of *Lobster*. This is not a book I ever imagined would get written in my lifetime. The author notes in his Acknowledgements (p. viii): 'This is a history of things that did not officially happen using primary sources that few realise exist.' If the subheads are familiar – Iran, Suez, Oman, Yemen, Malaya, Indonesia, British Guyana, Northern Ireland etc. – most of the content is new, thanks to an enormous effort at official file reading by the author.

The central theme is Britain, as a declining military power, using other (less costly) methods to engage with the Soviets in Europe (albeit to no effect); and, in the remnants of empire, to fend off nationalism and/or steer it in directions which suited British interests. Having said that, one of the things which is conspicuous by its absence is any evidence of British capital interacting with the British state and secret state. Did the chaps – and it is almost entirely men in this story – not need to do such things? Were they all on the same page without needing to state it? Or is it simply that none of this got put down on paper?

The most frequently used techniques were bribery, propaganda and manipulation. Phoney political movements and parties were created. This continued into the 1980s when the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) – *allegedly*, says the author – began funding one of the Islamic groups in Pakistan to spread Islamic literature among the Soviet republics with large Islamic populations. (p. 225) And there were phoney radio stations, newspapers, pamphlets, faked printed material of every kind, with the Information Research Department (IRD), the propaganda/psy-ops unit which

hovered between the Foreign Office and SIS, at the centre of it. 'Fake news' is nothing new: IRD generated mountains of it between 1945 and 1977. In IRD's last big operation, in Northern Ireland, the blizzard of 'fake news' stories it generated eventually produced the situation in which journalists trying to cover 'the Troubles', as one of them put it:

' . . . were being overwhelmed by a blizzard of facts and and atrocities, lies and propaganda, from all sides, and it was simply impossible to tell truth from fantasy, fact from fiction.' (p. 200)

On this account, IRD looks more significant than it has done previously. Its communist conspiracy idiocies of the 50s and 60s were not its only activity and the author presents accounts of IRD interfering in the local politics of British colonies, spreading disinformation. (Though how effective any of it was is unknown.)

If you wonder why so many of the former British colonies turned out to be corrupt once they were independent, the fact that the departing British did their best to corrupt those countries prior to independence may have something to do with it. In a short section, pp. 145–149, the author recounts attempts to steal or manipulate elections in the Gold Coast, Sudan, Tanganyika, Nigeria, Zambia, and British Guiana (Guyana).

Into the 1980s, as the line between state and private sector was blurred by Mrs Thatcher's infatuation with the men in expensive suits, the author discusses Le Circle (the Pinay Circle as was), Brian Crozier's Shield Committee and Keenie-Meenie Services and comments:

'As intelligence mixed with international trade and economics, the 1980s became a conspiracy theorist's dream and it remains difficult to separate fact from fiction.' (p. 242)

In twenty years time there may be enough official paper available to pick through the British spooks' role in that ghastly decade (if we're not all under water by then).

This is very largely a history of failure. Operations in Albania, Egypt and Syria (1958) were 'obvious failures' and – rather oddly, given how much attention he gives it – 'covert action in the colonies amounted to little'. He sees apparent successes in Oman (the SAS); Iran (the SIS-CIA coup) – but with disastrous long-term consequences; and Indonesia in 1965 – if involvement in the massacre of half a million people can be regarded as a success. He is uncertain about Northern Ireland and also notes that the failure to topple Colonel Gaddafi 'created a vacuum for international terrorism'. (He does not discuss UK involvement in funding various Islamist groups in Libya and Syria.)

'Covert action helped mask decline in other places such as the Middle East. Yet it could only stem the tide of nationalism for so long.' (p. 281) It also produced lasting distrust of the British in the region.

He notes that 'British covert action is a product of personality, departmental rivalries, and bureaucratic processes, as well as a rational response to a rising threat.' (p. 278) He depicts a fair bit of the bureaucratic struggles that went on, all of which was new to me.

The author writes of 'international terrorism' and that 'Britain successfully punched above its weight during the Cold War'. The use of these clichés tells us that he has an entirely conventional, 'establishment' view of world politics and his inquiries have not extended to the history of the first Cold War which forms the backdrop to much of the book. He takes for granted the received picture of them big bad Soviets, threatening to overrun Western Europe and trying to subvert it from within. He writes (p. 23) that circa 1947, 'Moscow broke a welter of post-war agreements with the West'. Did they? He offers no details. It's been a long time since I read the Cold War revisionist historians such as Gabriel Kolko, but one of the things they showed was that, *au contraire*, the Soviets were sticklers for diplomatic agreements. With a second Cold War now established, the debate over the origins and causes of the first one has become relevant again.

So: although the author has written an account which supports all the left critiques of imperialism and colonialism since WW2, he is not on the left. He began this book as a post-doc researcher at King's College, London, whose Defence Studies Department is the only university department I have been to which had armed guards at its doors, thanks to its Ministry of Defence funding. Nonetheless, this is a tremendous piece of research and an essential book.