

Article Review 160

Rory Cormac. "British 'Black' Productions: Forgeries, Front Groups, and Propaganda, 1951–1977," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 24:3 (Summer 2022): 4-42. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_01087

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Rory Cormac's study of covert influence, propaganda, and the United Kingdom (UK)'s Cold War operations was researched and published during a period of renewed scholarly and practitioner attention on Russian, Chinese, and many other autocratic governments' deployment of similar methods for so-called 'hostile foreign influence/interference.'¹ Cormac's study also arrives concurrent to a groundswell of new scholarship re-examining Cold War Soviet bloc covert propaganda and disinformation methods, part of a wider research agenda exploring Soviet bloc intelligence and security services.² Consequently, Cormac's examination of the very sensitive and potentially controversial covert propaganda techniques used by the British state to influence target audiences across the world during the Cold War provides a timely corrective to this focus on past and present autocratic states. There is not necessarily a moral equivalence in the use of these techniques by more autocratic and more liberal democratic governments. Rather, studies like this further open our understanding to the fundamentally similar methods that states can use, have used, and will continue to use to further their unacknowledged influence with particular audiences, irrespective of regime type and political culture.

Cormac's study is also timely in a more specific sense. It is the latest research in an embryonic new wave of scholarship examining the UK's Cold War-era covert influence institutions, methods, and impacts and the policies and strategies they served. Some, including this author, are examining these themes directly from Security Studies and International History perspectives.³ Others are integrating these themes into Cold War decolonisation, and post-colonial area studies, especially concerning the interactions of states and societies across the Global South with the Cold War actors of the Global North.⁴ This has been encouraged by a vast newly

¹ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, webpage, 'Partnership for Countering Information Operations', n.d., accessible at: < <https://carnegieendowment.org/specialprojects/counteringinfluenceoperations/>>; UK Home Office, 'Information relating to the National Security Bill', 6 June 2022, accessible at: < <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-national-security-bill>>.

² For example, see Douglas Selvage, "Operation 'Denver': The East German Ministry for State Security and the KGB's AIDS Disinformation Campaign, 1986–1989 (Part 2)," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 23:3 (2021): 4–80.

³ Thomas J. Maguire, *The Intelligence-Propaganda Nexus: British and American Covert Influence in Cold War Southeast Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Paul M. McGarr, "The Information Research Department, British Covert Propaganda, and the Sino-Indian War of 1962: Combating Communism and Courting Failure?," *The International History Review* 41:1 (2019): 130-156.

⁴ Kevin John McEvoy, "Before the Rubble: Britain's Secret Propaganda Offensive in Chile (1960-1973)," *Contemporary British History* 35:4 (2021), 597-619; Adam LoBue, "They Must Either be Informed or They Will be

disclosed official collection of primary sources at the UK National Archives since 2019 (more on that below), providing a booster shot to studies on these themes that first emerged in the late 1990s and 2000s following the first official release of historical records on the British state institution at the heart of this scholarship, the Foreign Office (the Foreign and Commonwealth Office from 1968) Information Research Department (IRD).⁵

Cormac is well placed to conduct this study as a professor of international relations at the University of Nottingham who specialises in secret intelligence and covert influence. His previous monograph on the history of British covert influence and articles on the IRD's covert propaganda role in Cold War Latin America and the early years of the Northern Ireland so-called 'Troubles' particularly establish his bona fides and guide his main themes and arguments.⁶ Drawing on a series of British covert operations and associated planning discussions from officials from the 1950s-1970s, Cormac's overarching aim is to make the case that well-established narratives about the British state's use of propaganda during the Cold War need revising. These narratives hold, Cormac suggests, that Britain's use of covert propaganda was generally "timid, restrained, and procedural" (4) compared to the Soviet Union's use of black propaganda and disinformation as a strategic weapon, on the whole focusing on exposing such activities through content that placed a premium on 'truthful' material disseminated unattributably through authoritative and credible intermediary contacts (i.e. so-called 'grey propaganda').

In contrast, Cormac argues that British civil servants' use of black propaganda to undermine adversaries—including using controlled and fabricated intermediaries distributing content that ranged from truthful to forged—was "more systemic, ambitious, and forceful than generally acknowledged" (5), especially to support "everyday" British foreign policy across the decolonising and post-colonial Global South by maintaining British influence in the face of Soviet bloc and Communist Chinese challenges. Additionally, Cormac articulates two further claims related to, first, the characteristics of black propaganda and disinformation and, second, perceptions of and judgements on the impact of covert influence operations.

Cormac's arguments are, ultimately, founded upon on a range of new evidence which was not available to the previous generation of researchers studying Britain's Cold War practices and covert influence operations more generally. This provides his analysis with the empirical authority to support calls for new thinking. From 2019 onwards, a new series of files has appeared in the UK National Archives. Under the code 'FCO168,' it relates to IRD operations since 1953. At the time of writing, it consists of over 8,000 files, with ongoing and frequent new releases. The series supplements an earlier release of IRD files in the series FO1110 and FCO95, which historians have previously used to good effect (though many avenues of empirical and conceptual research from those files remain to be explored too). The key difference between the new and previously declassified series that provides such a boon for studies like Cormac's is that FCO168 contains records detailing the more sensitive operational planning and methods of the IRD and close British operational partners like the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, commonly known as MI6) from so-called 'Red Jacket' files. Previous series contained primarily policy files and examples of final printed and broadcast propaganda products, with only hints at operational details. In seeking to find and generate evidence for new empirical and conceptual studies of covert influence practices, therefore, this series is invaluable.

Cominformed: Covert Propaganda, Political Literacy, and Cold War Knowledge Production in the Loyal African Brothers Series," *Journal of Global History* (2022): 1-20: doi:10.1017/S1740022822000109

⁵ Hugh Wilford, "The Information Research Department: Britain's Secret Cold War Weapon Revealed," *Review of International Studies*, 24:3 (1998): 353-69; Andrew Defty, *Britain, America and Anti-Communist Propaganda, 1945-1953* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2004); James Vaughan, "'Cloak without Dagger': How the Information Research Department Fought Britain's Cold War in the Middle East, 1948-56," *Cold War History* 4:3 (2004): 56-84.

⁶ Rory Cormac, "The Currency of Covert Action: British Special Political Action in Latin America, 1961-64," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45:6-7 (2022): 893-917; Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny: Spies, Special Forces, and the Secret Pursuit of British Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Cormac, "The Information Research Department, Unattributable Propaganda, and Northern Ireland: Promising Salvation but Ending in Failure?," *English Historical Review* 131:552 (2016): 1074-1104.

Cormac is one among several scholars—including this author—and journalists at the vanguard of exploiting this huge source base.⁷ Like the insights obtained from the ‘Migrated Archive’ on the late British Empire, the FCO168 material contains often jaw-dropping information on a network of British influence activities, notional and controlled publications and news agencies, and much more, which Cormac brings into the open in support of his central themes. This is a resource that will carry on giving in numerous different ways to scholars of different disciplines and approaches for decades to come, shedding new light not only on state covert influence practices but also global cultures of information, news, and publishing in the era of decolonisation and superpower rivalries.

As Cormac acknowledges in caveating his findings, this resource also poses significant challenges for future researchers. Many of the documents in its files remain redacted or retained, many whole files remain closed, and the sheer volume of material will pose difficulties for those wishing to gain a breadth of understanding of the IRD’s and Britain’s Cold War influence campaigns. Nevertheless, no other historical resource on such practices by any state around the world compares to this. That Cormac’s article is founded upon this resource stands in its favour, as it is crucial for challenging the previous consensus derived from the FO1110 and FCO95 series.

Cormac does well to situate some of the themes of his study within the wider historiographies of the Cold War as a competition over ideas, the importance of perceptions in shaping policy, and the interactions between Cold War, decolonisation, and post-colonial interests and incentives in shaping the focus and more aggressive content of British propaganda in the Global South compared to IRD operations in Europe. This mirrored trends in the relatively more intrusive use of covert influence operations by Cold War actors across the Global South compared to Europe from the mid-1950s, characterised by more offensive thinking, greater risk-taking, and more widespread collateral damage.⁸ Cormac’s evidence and analysis reinforces the need for broader studies of British Cold War and post-colonial foreign and defence policies to consider these means by which successive British governments sought to maintain global influence in the second half of the twentieth century.

Additionally, Cormac’s characterisation of the existing historiography on the IRD more specifically—including work by this author—is fair. We have indeed generally framed the British state’s Cold War influence operations as characterised by a grey propaganda *modus operandi* that relied on authoritative, credible, and authentic intermediary contacts for dissemination, a focus on exposing negative features of adversaries’ practices, policies, and ideological beliefs in the eyes of particular target audiences, and an operating philosophy that emphasised using selectively edited truthful material from collected intelligence for this exposure.

Cormac’s argument and supporting evidence succeed in pushing against parts of this characterisation. They call for more nuance and acknowledgement of a willingness by state officials to take more controversial operational risks, doing so in a measured manner for a topic that can attract more sensational interpretations. Several cases examined here demonstrate that British use of inauthentic intermediaries and fabricated output was not only more systematic but also, in the policy and political contexts in which it was deployed, more forceful in seeking to stir tensions, disrupt adversaries, sow chaos, and, in some cases, even incite violence. This ranged from encouragement of disorderly conduct by students from the New Left during the Soviet-backed World Youth Festival in Bulgaria in 1968 to stoking racial tensions towards the Soviet bloc among students and non-aligned

⁷ See also McGarr, “Fake News, Forgery, and Falsification: Western Responses to Soviet Disinformation in Cold War India,” *The International History Review* 43:1 (2021): 34-53; McEvoy, “Before the Rubble”; LoBue, “‘They Must Either be Informed or They Will be Cominformed’”; James Oliver and Nicholas Gilby, “Revealed: The Secret British Plan to Keep Italy’s Communists from Power,” *The Observer*, 2 October 2022; Jason Burke, “Revealed: How UK Targeted American Civil Rights Leader in Covert Campaign,” *The Guardian*, 13 September 2022; Burke, “Secret British ‘Black Propaganda’ Campaign Targeted Cold War Enemies,” *The Guardian*, 14 May 2022.

⁸ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (London: Allen Lane, 2005); Mark T. Berger, “The Real Cold War Was Hot: The Global Struggle for the Third World,” *Intelligence and National Security* 23:1 (2008): 112–126; Piero Gleijeses, “The CIA’s Paramilitary Operations during the Cold War: An Assessment,” *Cold War History* 16:3 (2016): 291-306.

leaders across Africa at the discriminatory treatment of some African students in Soviet bloc universities during the 1960s, to most controversially encouraging further Indonesian violent military purges against Communists and ethnic Chinese in Indonesia in late 1965 (15-16, 24-25, 33-34).

Interestingly, when using these methods, Cormac shows that IRD and SIS operations tended to be more personally directed against leadership targets when countering anti-colonial/anti-British nationalist movements compared to when targeting Cold War Communist adversaries like the USSR and China. Cormac briefly suggests that this reflected a more unrestrained attitude towards, say, African targets than Soviet ones (5-6, 26-27). Deeper investigation may also reveal perceptions within IRD's relevant geographic research desks and Editorial Section that while the USSR/Communism was a political system and ideology that needed countering at that level, nationalist movements in Africa and Asia were more driven by the charismatic authority of personalities like Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah or Indonesia's President Sukarno that could, therefore, be undermined by discrediting these personalities. This potential reasoning, its connection to exotic othering, and the extent to which it was based on concerted intelligence and analysis or cultural biases requires more attention in future research.

There are some small empirical items that are open to debate. Cormac finds that few black operations targeted China directly, explaining that this reflected a British priority to counter Chinese influence in Asia and Africa more broadly in order to maintain and grow British support there (21). While certainly valid, this overlooks the additional British concern to avoid inciting further Chinese Communist pressure on and in Hong Kong that had restricted covert influence activities targeting China since 1948. Additionally, regarding the IRD's operational relationship with SIS, Cormac maintains that IRD black operations were conducted “*on top* of SIS black propaganda” carried out by its Special Political Action (SPA) Section, and that this section conducted the bulk of activities during the 1950s before the IRD's footprint increased (9-10). Yet this author's own research suggests a more nuanced picture, with an agreement reached with SIS in the IRD's founding year in 1948 for the department's editorial teams to supply the output for SIS distribution through its controlled channels when covert/black propaganda was desired.⁹ SIS officers in posts around the world, for example, were those tasked with mailing operations to particular addresses rather than regular diplomatic information officers due to the additional operational security needed for such sensitive products. The operations of both the IRD and SIS, therefore, were often inextricably linked. This only started to become more complicated, with greater IRD responsibility in a number of countries for operationalisation of black output, when the department recruited and posted its own field officers with this remit across the Global South in the 1960s to work closely with SIS stations with a ‘hybrid’ functionality to bridge two organisations' activities.

Whether the picture that Cormac paints of systematic usage of black propaganda completely overturns the existing orthodoxy on British influence operations also deserves reflection.¹⁰ While the IRD's Special Editorial Unit/Special Operations Section took the lead in conjunction with SIS on the 350 operations identified by Cormac, for the department's main Editorial Section, grey propaganda, involving unattributable products disseminated to and through authentic, sympathetic intermediary contacts, remained its bread and butter for an infinitely larger number of operations and, therefore, an integral feature of British methodology globally.

Additionally, Cormac contends that black operations were different because they were “designed to disrupt, divide, and discredit as much as to expose.” (13). Yet as his case evidence and analysis of the meta-narratives of IRD black propaganda content demonstrate, exposure—of Soviet setbacks, deceit, and expansionism across the Global South, for example—was not an end itself. Rather, it was a means pursued through notional intermediaries, from fictitious think tanks like the ‘International Committee for the Investigation of Communist Front Organisations’ and fabricated nationalist organisations like the ‘Freedom for Africa Movement’—to deploy

⁹ Maguire, *Intelligence-Propaganda Nexus*, chapter two.

¹⁰ See Wilford, ‘Information Research Department’; Defty, *Anti-Communist Propaganda*; Vaughan, ‘Cloak Without Dagger’.

material to discredit, divide, and disrupt adversaries (13-34). Relative to grey propaganda, black propaganda could also more directly disrupt without utilising exposure. As Cormac shows, this was especially so through the use of notional intermediaries to call for disruptive action against adversarial targets and via IRD forgeries that were supposedly produced by adversaries that could generate internal confusion and dissension with external partners, depending on the context. This is an important new finding. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the prominence of exposing adversaries as a method in IRD black operations aligns closely with established findings regarding British grey propaganda.

Moreover, British propagandists and senior civil servants still held ‘truth’ and ‘credibility’ to be vital considerations when utilising both kinds of operation. It is this theme in the article and the work of others on British and wider influence operations that is likely to continue to generate the most empirical and conceptual debate. Cormac argues that the use of inauthentic intermediary sources—like a notional pan-African anti-colonial organisation or forged correspondence from a real Communist-dominated international organisation—was, in some cases, intended to confuse and deceive target audiences and that, even when deception was not the primary intention, it was an inescapable outcome. “Fake sources did not simply add credibility to truths,” Cormac asserts, they “shaped how audiences would interpret and respond” to propaganda content (7). Nevertheless, from my own research, I would counter that credibility (real or manufactured), efforts to enhance such credibility, and perceptions (perceptive or incorrect) of which sources would be most credible were fundamental to shaping how audiences would interpret and respond to messages. Notional fronts, or even forgeries claiming to originate from adversaries, were intended to create sources and voices that could be considered more credible messengers for targets, in similar ways to authentic intermediaries. Deception may have been inescapable—and, thus, ethically unacceptable in many of the contexts Cormac discusses—but credibility often remained the core consideration.¹¹

Similarly, as one of Cormac’s secondary arguments also explains, British propagandists’ default was to use (selectively edited and spun) factual material from intelligence and research for the content of such black operations, as with their grey operations. This was even the case when deploying forgeries, with a fabricated letterhead and signature from an adversary containing selectively edited factual material derived from intelligence on that adversary the British knew, or believed, to be true. Cormac does reveal some important caveats to this. British propagandists based in London and Singapore during the *Konfrontasi* conflict between Indonesia and Malaysia from 1963-1966 do appear to have been more willing in that context to have significantly bent the truth and included falsehoods in content targeting Indonesia’s President Sukarno (32-33). Nevertheless, in general, while informed by wider liberal ideology and enlightenment thinking, the assumptions behind IRD’s default setting again rested on considerations of credibility for target audiences compared to pushing overly slanted material or outright ‘lies’ too often. Whether designed to foster affinities towards British policies and socio-political ideologies or to incite divisions and reactions that were beneficial to British interests, British practitioners hoped that their propaganda content would be more authoritative and persuasive if founded on both perceivably credible sources and content.

This debate feeds into a wider conceptual discussion regarding understanding and delineating the fundamental characteristics of certain political influence activities. Here, Cormac’s article makes a further contribution in highlighting the need for more conceptual clarity between content and source attribution when studying grey or black propaganda and disinformation, for the operational, political, legal, and ethical implications of deception with one were and are not necessarily the same as with the other (7). Commentary on disinformation frequently concentrates on content, but this article underscores the significance of interpreting sources in historical and contemporary studies too, from covertly controlled real influencers to so-called ‘sock puppets,’ fabricated, notional online identities

Likewise, by evaluating IRD perceptions of success and impact along the twin themes of outputs and outcomes, the article underscores the difficulties of tracking the often intangible effects of propaganda. Typically deployed

¹¹ Maguire, *Intelligence-Propaganda Nexus*.

to nudge pre-existing developments along, the covert deployment of propaganda can confound efforts to isolate agency and consequence. Cormac's evidence and analysis on this theme is some of the most novel of the whole article, providing fascinating insights on how British practitioners managed the risks of operational exposure and how and why adversaries like the Soviet Union and China sought to overplay the hand of an omnipotent CIA rather than the UK when seeking to expose these activities (37-38). This complicates debates about the success, failure, and evaluations of covert influence operations that currently revolve around exposure as a marker of failure and large-N data sets of regime change.¹² In these ways, therefore, Cormac also continues his career effort to date to nuance our understanding of unacknowledged state influence practices beyond the typically rigid 'covert action' conceptual framing in Intelligence Studies that is typically shaped by American experiences.¹³

More could have been said of key concepts underpinning studies of influence and communication such as credibility, authenticity, authority, and the processes of persuasion. In my own research, for example, I have found the concept of 'cultural intermediaries' first developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to be a profitable tool in examining state influence activities.¹⁴ It helps to explore how individuals and institutions acting between producers and consumers of messaging or other cultural productions are intended to, and can, shape meaning, value, and perceived authenticity and credibility.¹⁵ The article also raises questions, which are not directly addressed, regarding British efforts to tailor both propaganda content and real and notional dissemination sources and channels to particular target audiences. How competent were the processes for doing this, how insightful was the propagandists' understanding of their audiences and adversary competitors, and did this translate into feasibly persuasive messaging? Did they build off valid, reliable, and accurate intelligence and research? Or were they (also) influenced by unhelpful first principles of persuasion and their own cultural biases and that of the intelligence and research they drew upon towards their targets?

Nevertheless, as any good study should, this article will spur such further thinking and research related to not only the UK's efforts to maintain influence in the world in the second half of the twentieth century during an era of major strategic shifts, but to those of other state and non-state actors using similar unacknowledged activities. It actively challenges and nuances established orthodoxies. And it provokes deeper conceptual thinking regarding how we understand the most deceptive forms of influence and communications. In demonstrating what is possible with such a rich new empirical treasure trove for studies on these issues, the article will resonate with future studies on how and why the UK worked with an array of state and non-state actors for its covert influence campaigns, the extent to which these actors were co-opted or used their own agency to negotiate their relationships, how these British efforts compared to those of allies, neutrals, and adversaries, and to what extent these British methods are echoed in more contemporary practices. Together with the accompanying new wave of research on these issues and using these sources, Cormac's study is an important springboard for international scholars and students alike.

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¹² Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in Secret Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Lindsey A. O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

¹³ Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich, "Grey Is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability," *International Affairs* 94:3 (2018), 477-494; Cormac, Calder Walton and Damien Van Puyvelde, "What Constitutes Successful Covert Action? Evaluating Unacknowledged Interventionism in Foreign Affairs," *Review of International Studies* 48:1 (January 2022), 111-128.

¹⁴ Maguire, *Intelligence-Propaganda Nexus*, chapter one.

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2010 [1979]); Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews, eds., *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader* (London: Sage, 2015).

focuses on the roles of intelligence, propaganda, covert influence, and international security cooperation in contemporary and historical international politics, including related publications on British Cold War, colonial, and post-colonial influence campaigns and, most recently, a study of the use of intelligence for influencing external audiences during the 2022 Ukraine-Russia conflict (Huw Dylan and Thomas J. Maguire, “Secret Intelligence and Public Diplomacy in the Ukraine War,” *Survival* 64:4 (2022), 33-74). His next monograph, *The Intelligence-Propaganda Nexus: British and American Covert Influence in Cold War Southeast Asia*, is forthcoming with Oxford University Press in 2023.