

[Morgan on Conboy and Morrison, 'The CIA's Secret War in Tibet'](#)

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Kenneth J. Conboy, James Morrison. *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. x + 301 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1159-1.

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In *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet*, Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison recount the efforts of the Central Intelligence Agency to assist Tibetan resistance fighters in their struggle against the People's Republic of China (PRC) from the 1950s to the 1970s. Although the Agency had contacts with Tibetans since the Chinese reoccupied Tibet in 1950, it did not organize a major operation in the country until Khampa tribesmen launched rebellions against the PRC in 1955 and 1956. With the assistance of Gyalo Thondup, a brother of the Dalai Lama who was active in the politics of the Tibetan refugee community, the CIA recruited and trained six Tibetan refugees to serve as agents in assessing the strength of rebellion and in preparing for the creation of a resistance network. By 1958, reports from these agents convinced the Eisenhower administration that the Tibetans had the ability to wage a sustained campaign against Chinese rule. The CIA therefore carried out a program of secretly dropping supplies to the Tibetan insurgents and training Tibetan agents to organize resistance and intelligence networks within the country. This effort, however, was launched just as the People's Liberation Army took increasingly effective measures in suppressing the rebels. Tibetan radio agents did play a crucial role in assisting the Dalai Lama as he fled the escalating fighting by informing the U.S. and Indian governments about the Lama's request for sanctuary in India. This important propaganda victory nevertheless did nothing to stop the PLA's destruction and dispersal of the guerrilla bands that the Agency assisted.

The failure of the rebellion, however, did not bring an end to American efforts to use Tibet as an active front against the PRC. In the 1960s, the CIA continued training Tibetan agents for intelligence and sabotage operations in Tibet and it set up a base for a guerrilla unit in the remote Nepalese kingdom of Mustang. After China's border war with India in 1962, the Agency worked closely with Indian intelligence services in training and supplying agents in Tibet and in creating a special forces unit of Tibetan refugees that was eventually called the Special Frontier Force. The CIA's Tibetan operations continued until the 1970s when strains in U.S.-Indian relations, the improvement of U.S. diplomatic ties with the PRC, and the Nepalese government's occupation of the Mustang base brought the Tibet program to an end.

In addition to training agents and paramilitary units for operations inside Tibet, the CIA took other steps to aid the Tibetan resistance. A CIA subsidiary, the Committee for Free Asia, financed a trip that Thubten Norbu, another one of the Dalai Lama's brothers, made to the United States in the early 1950s to plead for American support for Tibetan independence. When Tibetans lobbied for the passage of a United Nations resolution that expressed concern over PRC policies in Tibet in 1959, the CIA provided information to sympathetic journalists and editors in an effort to build up public support

for the resolution. The Agency also assisted the Dalai Lama's government-in-exile by giving a \$180,000 annual donation to the Dalai Lama's charitable trust fund until 1967 and by subsidizing a training program for Tibetan officials and agents at Cornell University. It also purchased Tibetan art works for display at the government-in-exile's Tibet House in New Delhi.

In the book's preface, Conboy and Morrison write that the story of the CIA's activities in Tibet has been told before, but they contend that this story needs to be retold for several reasons. "Tibet," they claim, "became a vital cold war proving ground for CIA case officers and their spycraft." Much of the equipment that the Agency used in subsequent years, especially aircraft and communications gear, was "combat tested in the most extreme conditions imaginable" (p. ix). CIA personnel also learned techniques for air dropping supplies and in establishing communications networks that were used in subsequent operations. Moreover, they learned to work closely with other government agencies, especially the armed forces and U.S. Forest Service, in getting the pilots, parachute instructors, and aircraft needed to implement the program. Finally, many of the officers who participated in the Tibet program later assumed positions of greater responsibility in directing CIA activities in other parts of the world, especially Vietnam and Laos. John Kenneth Knaus, who trained Tibetan agents and later headed the Tibet Task Force in the early 1960s, went on to hold senior positions at Langley. Roger McCarthy, the head of the Tibet Task Force at the height of its activities from 1959 until 1961, later led operations in Vietnam and Laos. Two CIA members who trained Tibetan agents in Colorado, Thomas Fosmire and Anthony Poshpenny (*Tony Poe*), also served in Indochina for several years.

The authors also write that the CIA's Tibet program played an important role in forging closer ties between the United States and India, particularly the CIA and its Indian counterparts. Despite serious disputes over issues such as India's Cold War neutralism and America's alliance with Pakistan, common fears about Chinese policies in Tibet "led Washington and New Delhi to become secret partners over the course of several U.S. administrations" (p. x). Conboy's and Morrison's description of this partnership is one of the greatest strengths of the book. The authors provide a detailed account of CIA collaboration with the Indian intelligence services in training and equipping Tibetan agents and special forces troops and in forming joint aerial and intelligence units such as the Aviation Research Center and Special Center. This collaboration continued well into the 1970s and some of the programs that it sponsored, especially the operations of the Special Frontier Force under Indian command, continue into the present.

Finally, Conboy and Morrison claim that the CIA's role in assisting the Dalai Lama in his flight from Tibet and in establishing a Tibetan government-in-exile as well as paramilitary forces "was a significant boost in the morale in the refugee community." This assistance, they argue, "helped carry the diaspora community and its leadership through the darkest years of exile when their cause might have been otherwise forgotten" (p. x). This argument is likely to spark the strongest disagreement from some of the book's readers. Although it is true that the Americans gave valuable assistance to the Dalai Lama during the early years of his exile, their very involvement in the revolt against the PRC did much to create the tensions that shaped his decision to flee Tibet. Moreover, as Tsering Shakya writes in *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, the CIA's Tibetan operations convinced the PRC's leaders that they faced "a direct threat to China's security" and this conviction "may explain the ferocity of Chinese suppression of the Tibetan revolt." [1]

The book also gives the impression that many of the CIA's Tibetan operations were simply ineffectual

and costly failures despite the ingenuity and bravery of both the Tibetan and American agents. Aid to the revolt in the late 1950s did not prevent the rebellion's ultimate defeat and the harsh Chinese policies that followed. Virtually all of the agents who infiltrated Tibet for the purpose of creating resistance or intelligence networks were killed, captured, or forced to flee the country. The guerrilla force based at Mustang scored an impressive early success by capturing a cache of classified Chinese documents in 1961, but did little in subsequent years because of effective Chinese border control measures and infighting among the force's leadership. The unit, as one of its officers put it, "went on existing for the sake of existence" (p. 199).

Although Conboy and Morrison do not systematically analyze the reasons for the Tibet program's failure, they do mention a number of factors that undermined its effectiveness. The Tibetan leadership constantly suffered from differences concerning personalities, policy, and regional loyalties. Despite widespread resentment against their rule, the Chinese implemented rigorous security measures that discouraged local support for the CIA's Tibetan agents. Finally, neither the United States nor the South Asian governments that supported or tolerated the Agency's activities were willing to countenance a campaign that risked an open conflict with the PRC.

In writing *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet*, Conboy and Morrison draw on earlier accounts such as John Prados's *Presidents' Secret Wars*. They also acknowledge their debt to memoirs written by former CIA officers such as Knaus and McCarthy.[2] The authors have nevertheless added a great deal of new information concerning the CIA's work. They have consulted documents from the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series and Declassified Documents Reference Service as well as memoirs and secondary works concerning the Tibet operation. They add much to the record through their interviews of many of the surviving principals. They have interviewed or corresponded with many of the surviving CIA personnel, including Knaus, McCarthy, Fosmire, and Poshpenny as well as American civilian and military personnel who supported the program. Many of the Tibetan leaders and agents such as Gyalo Thondup, Lhamo Tsering, Baba Yeshe, and Jamba Kalden were also interviewed. Moreover, Conboy and Morrison also contacted Indians, Nepalese, and Sikkimese who dealt with the CIA during this time. In drawing on interviews in writing the book, the authors have been careful to check the reliability of their sources and have avoided making sensationalist claims.

The CIA's Secret war in Tibet clearly describes the organization and execution of CIA operations, but provides less detail about the higher level policy decisions affecting the CIA program. The book provides enough information for readers to understand the general direction of American, Chinese, and Tibetan policies, but other works give a more comprehensive coverage of these matters. Knaus's *Orphans of the Cold War* provides a detailed view of Washington's Tibet policies while works by Shakya, A. Tom Grunfeld, and Melvyn C. Goldstein discuss the problems faced by leaders in Beijing and Lhasa.[3] The book's coverage of American policies is stronger than that of China's although the authors have consulted histories published in Taiwan and the PRC. The book's discussion of Chinese affairs is also marred by misspellings and inconsistencies in using the Wade-Giles and Pinyin systems. The most striking example of this is when the authors repeatedly refer to China's Hui Muslim minority as "Hiu" Muslims. Conboy and Morrison are generally sympathetic and respectful in their treatment of Tibetan culture, but they refer to the Dalai Lama's consultations with spiritual mediums as "channeling sessions."

Despite these problems, *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet* provides a clear and valuable account of the

Agency's Tibetan campaign and it is a welcome addition to the literature of the subject.

Notes

[1]. Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A Modern History of Tibet Since 1947* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 171.

[2]. John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations Since World War II* (New York: William Morrow, 1986); John Kenneth Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Struggle for Tibetan Survival* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999); and Roger McCarthy, *Tears of the Lotus: Accounts of Tibetan Resistance to the Chinese Invasion, 1950-1961* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1997).

[3]. A. Tom Grunfeld, *The Making of Modern Tibet*, revised edition (Armonk, N.Y., 1996); and Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1989) and *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1997).

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