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Since the Waldegrave Initiative on Open Government in 1992, the British Government has declassified many of its own archives. Based on newly declassified records accessible at the National Archives, London, “The Pinprick Approach” reveals for the first time a Cabinet committee hitherto unexplored in the literature, the Official Committee on Communism (Overseas), also known as the AC (O).

‘Collegiality’ is a distinctive trait in British policymaking.¹ Since collegiality masks the political processes of debate and discussion by presenting seemingly joint consensus amongst committee members, it is difficult to use the archives to assess where power lies in the chain of command in making British foreign or defence policy. By examining the records of the AC (O), Rory Cormac nevertheless offers insight into the British policymaking process between 1950 and 1951, when different conceptions of how to conduct the Cold War persisted within the British Government. He also examines how Britain’s counter-subversion strategy developed in the early Cold War in the context of Britain’s covert action against Eastern Europe during the same period.

Cormac is one of the leading new scholars of intelligence in the UK and produces books and articles at an astonishing rate.² According to him, the records of the AC (O) contain


² Rory Cormac, *Confronting the Colonies: British Intelligence and Counterinsurgency* (OUP USA, 2014); *Spying on the World: The Joint Intelligence Committee and Events which Shaped History*, co-authored
“an indubitable gold mine of political warfare, counter-subversion, and special operations” (11). He shows in the article that the AC (O) coordinated and supervised all British Government clandestine activities from 1949 until 1956 including political, economic and psychological warfare, and that clandestine activities were considered a tool for implementing overt foreign policy objectives at the time.

Cormac shows that the Clement Attlee government planned and conducted covert operations behind the Iron Curtain “to a greater extent than has hitherto been acknowledged”. British officials had “an overarching strategy for fighting the secret war” which “proved a useful step in the right direction” (7). The AC (O)’s strategy was “cautious...less provocative, of lesser scope, and narrower objective” (13) than earlier approaches such as paramilitary operations in Albania. This so-called ‘pinprick’ strategy used “experiments and pilot schemes in political, economic, and psychological warfare – but not sabotage” (27) to gradually chip away at Communist and Soviet control in the Eastern bloc “by exploiting political weaknesses, targeting economic vulnerabilities, promoting dissension, and spreading distrust....the aim was not liberation...but gradually to make the satellite states a liability rather than an asset and “in general to make things as difficult as possible for the Communist Governments” (13).

Cormac constructs a robust analysis of Britain’s covert strategy from the available records. He persuasively argues throughout the article that the AC (O), which was chaired by the Foreign Office, was successful in restraining the more radical and aggressive approaches to clandestine operations mostly envisaged and instigated by the Chiefs of Staff. The AC (O) acted as a “useful forum for the coordination and guidance” (20) of clandestine activities and oversaw the launch of a wave of such activities to implement overt British policy towards Eastern Europe behind the Iron Curtain. As Cormac notes, this British interdepartmental committee approach was the key to the policy’s success.

However, Cormac’s allusion to the evolution of British covert strategy in the title of the article has narrow foundations. His analysis mostly derives from records of the late 1940s up to 1950. In addition, Cormac admits to problems and issues associated with the AC (O) in the article, which also make his argument less robust and more ambivalent. As he acknowledges in the article, the AC (O) was “short-lived” (25) – it did not meet after 1951 and was “deadlocked by the middle of the 1950s” (28). Owing to a methodological hurdle

– the fact that “the bulk of the AC (O) files beyond 1950 remain classified” (25) – the article leaves unanswered questions, which renders Cormac’s assessment, as he admits, “tentative” (20).

With the help of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) of 2000, the reviewer had an opportunity to consult records on the AC (O) and subsequent developments in the committee after this period. Based on some of these declassified records, this reviewer thus would like to share further information on the subsequent development of the AC (O) to support Cormac’s tentative assessment and also to fill in the gaps in the article.

Following Cabinet approval on 24 February 1956, the AC (O) was disbanded and replaced by two new counter-subversive committees—one for the colonial territories and another for foreign territories. Similar to the AC (O), the Official Committee on Counter-Subversion in the Colonial Territories was formed as an inter-departmental committee in the Cabinet Office to supervise all counter-subversive activities in the colonies, including some Commonwealth countries, under the direction of the Colonial Policy Committee. As the available records at the National Archives show, similar to the ‘pinprick approach’ from Cormac’s analysis of the Attlee Government, this interdepartmental committee adopted a less provocative approach to conducting clandestine activities. After the Colonial Policy Committee ceased to exist in late 1963 as a consequence of the re-organisation of cabinet committees and government departments, the Committee on Counter-Subversion was renamed the “Counter-Subversive Committee” and placed under the new Official Committee on Defence and Overseas Policy.4

The other committee had different characteristics. The other committee, the Overseas Planning Committee (1956-57), often referred to as the ‘special’ committee, was established in the Foreign Office and was directly concerned with foreign countries. From 1957, after absorbing the Russia Committee, the Overseas Planning Committee was renamed the Political Intelligence Committee.5 Unlike the interdepartmental Official Committee on Counter-Subversion in the Colonial Territories, the Overseas Planning Committee was an intra-departmental committee in essence – it consisted of senior experts of three geographical areas of the Foreign Office: the Soviet Union and its satellites, the Middle East, and the Far East. Experts on other areas, such as Central and

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3 The National Archives (TNA), London: Public Record Office (PRO) CAB130/114: GEN 520/1st meeting, “Committee on Counter-Subversion in Colonial Territories,” 16 Mar 1956. It was composed of the representatives of the Foreign, Colonial, and Commonwealth Offices, Ministry of Defence and MI6 and MI5, excluding the Chiefs of Staff.

4 See TNA: PRO CAB21/5379, the file entitled, “Counter-Subversion.”

5 A minute by the Foreign Office “The Russia Committee and the Overseas Planning Committee,” 18 Jul 1957. O/1/57. Obtained under the FOIA at my request (REF: 1258-12), 8 Mar 2013.
South America, economic matters, and information matters were called on if necessary. MI6 and the Joint Intelligence Bureau (JIB) also had their own representatives there.⁶

The separation of the committees came from the realization that the British Government at that time had different objectives towards foreign and colonial territories. The committees were designed to facilitate covert activities under the direction of its foreign and colonial policy objectives. As Cormac notes in the case of the Attlee Government, covert activities were also considered a useful tool for achieving wider foreign and colonial objectives by the subsequent Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan Conservative Governments. Cormac also quotes Eden’s memorandum noting that “counter-subversion is an instrument of policy, not an end in itself...subsidiary to the main, overt, means by which policy is pursued” (26). The attitude towards intelligence as a tool of implementing foreign and colonial policy thus continued beyond Cormac’s period of analysis.

Although it goes unexamined in the article, Cormac hints at ongoing tensions between civilian and military officials over the conduct of clandestine activities after the Attlee Government (26-7). The quarrelling over the conduct of ‘Cold War’ activities persisted in the early 1950s but was more or less contained from the Eden Government onwards.

Unlike the old AC (O), the aforementioned new committees excluded the Chiefs of Staff. Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd appointed Douglas Dodds-Parker, his Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, to chair the Overseas Planning Committee in order to ensure that “a Minister be closely concerned because he could then talk to the Chiefs of Staff and the Minister of Defence as well as discussing with the Secretary of State himself.”⁷ Dodds-Parker’s chairmanship of the Foreign Office’s special committee was formally accepted by the same Cabinet meeting that approved Eden’s memorandum on 24 February 1956.⁸ Lloyd also decided to include Major-General William G. Stirling on the Overseas Planning Committee as a representative of the Ministry of Defence “in order to keep the Chiefs of Staff informed”.⁹ A memorandum circulated around the Foreign Office and Foreign Secretary contained their rationale for having an indirect representative from the Chiefs of Staff, instead of a direct representative, since the Chiefs of Staff often argued that

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⁷ A minute by Patrick Dean to Sir I. Kirkpatrick, 31 Dec 1955. OPS/1/55. Obtained under the FOIA at my request (REF: 1258-12), 8 Mar 2013.


⁹ Quoted from TNA: PREM11/1582: minute by Brook to PM, 23 Feb 1956.
stronger counter-subversive activities were necessary based on “hearsay” from their low-level representatives and did not “always know what they [were] talking about.”

Once the government’s counter-subversive policy was made clear, Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office (1953-57), despatched a top-secret and personal letter by diplomatic bag to all ambassadorial and ministerial positions in foreign countries, approving the use of “counter-subversion, i.e. clandestine activities whether by propaganda or by special operations,” which “will have an increasing part to play in support of foreign policy.” The letter also noted, “you should not hesitate to put forward such suggestions, whether they are for overt anti-Communist measures or for ways in which the policies of Her Majesty’s Government might be furthered by clandestine means.” Kirkpatrick added, “even in cases where counteraction is not possible by ourselves owing to lack of resources, it may still be possible to do something in consultation with our allies, e.g. the Americans.”

Indeed, as Cormac rightly notes, this was a period of “unregulated British covert action – an era of robber barons within MI6” (28). While the intriguing question of to what extent such clandestine activities were in fact directed and supervised by the Foreign Office’s secret committee is beyond the scope of this review, there is an indication that senior high-powered officials and politicians were involved in planning more radical clandestine activities, such as overthrowing the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser. Douglas Dodds-Parker, the Chairman of the Overseas Planning Committee, asked Sir Charles Hambro, a former chief of the wartime Special Operations Executive (SOE), to suggest clandestine actions that could be conducted against Egypt and Nasser. By mid-August 1956, Dodds-Parker was already contemplating Britain’s strategic position in the Middle East after

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10 A minute by Sir I. Kirkpatrick to the Foreign Secretary, 13 Feb 1956. OPS/1/56. Obtained under the FOIA at my request (REF: 1258-12), 8 Mar 2013, which contains “For example, they [the Chiefs of Staff] constantly allege that the Foreign Office block all proposals for action against the Communists. This they are told by some of their low-level representatives.” Emphasis original.

11 A letter by Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick to Ambassador/Minister overseas, 17 May 1956. OPS/1/56, obtained under the FOIA at my request (REF: 1258-12), 8 Mar 2013.

12 Ibid.

Nasser.\textsuperscript{14} The literature also suggests that Conservative backbenchers, such as Julian Amery, also a former SOE officer, also conspired to overthrow Nasser.\textsuperscript{15}

As this review has shown, the evolution of British covert action strategy continued after the AC (O). The short-lived committee was only a preview of the larger scale evolution of British counter-subversion strategy in the years to come.

Cormac’s new article offers an appreciation of how the British way of managing a committee, ‘collegiality,’ emerged after the Second World War, and how far clandestine activities were considered a tool for implementing overt foreign policy objectives at the time, even if the article can only show the early stage of the development of British counter-subversion strategy. This review instead indicates that it was at a later period, from the Eden Government onwards, that clandestine activities were considered a desperate measure to compensate for the declining power of the British Empire.

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\textsuperscript{14} Magdalene College, Oxford: Private Papers of Douglas Dodds-Parker: MC: P2/5/2C/8: minute by Dodds-Parker to Lord Reading, classified as Top secret, 'future aims in the Middle East', 14 Aug 1956. Also \textit{ibid.}, note by C.R.A. Rae to Dodds-Parker, 14 Aug 1956, which pondered “If we clobber Nasser quickly and then pull out, what guarantees are there that there will be no repeat performance by a successor Government?”