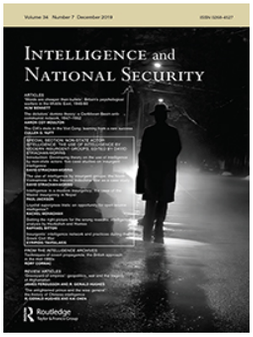

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FROM THE INTELLIGENCE ARCHIVES

Techniques of covert propaganda: the British approach in the mid-1960s

Rory Cormac

ABSTRACT
In early 2019, the British government declassified a tranche of Information Research Department files. Among them is a candid and concise overview of British thinking about covert propaganda, complete with a list of examples of British forgery operations. This short piece transcribes the briefing note and provides an introduction. The document sheds new light on UK covert action, but also talks to ongoing scholarly debates in Intelligence Studies and International Relations more broadly.

In early 2019, the British government declassified a tranche of Information Research Department (IRD) files. Among them is a candid and concise overview of British thinking about covert propaganda, complete with a list of examples of British forgery operations.[1] It sheds new light on UK covert action, but also talks to ongoing scholarly debates in Intelligence Studies and International Relations more broadly.

The IRD was created inside the Foreign Office in early 1948 to counter Soviet propaganda. Established under terms of the so-called Secret Vote, it expanded quickly and confidentially served a range of 'clients' from friendly governments and trade-union leaders, to Radio Free Europe and counter-subversion partners in the Middle East. Throughout much of its existence, and especially during its first two decades, the IRD focused on international communism. After the Suez Canal crisis in 1956, it gained a mandate to counter Arab nationalism, and, by the 1960s its activities extended to other hostile targets, including President Sukarno's Indonesian regime. David Owen, the Labour Foreign Secretary, closed the IRD down in 1977.[2]

The IRD engaged in unattributable propaganda. Generally speaking, it distributed material, often based on sanitised intelligence, into foreign media outlets through trusted contacts. The recently declassified files (FCO 168) cover policy and operational detail. In doing so, they provide a more holistic understanding of IRD and British propaganda; the existing files, FO 1110 and FCO 95, declassified in the 1990s and 2000s respectively, were generally less sensitive.

The new documents make it clear that IRD was doing more than grey, or unattributable, propaganda: it also had 'capacity for special political action in the Information field.'[3] Special political action involved bribery, propaganda, covert political funding, and, ultimately, orchestrating coups.[4] It is usually associated with the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, or MI6) which had an SPA section from the early- to mid-1950s as well as an SPA (Prop) unit dealing with black propaganda.[5] The connection between IRD and black propaganda is greater than hitherto assumed.

This is significant, not just on a bureaucratic level where overlap between SIS and IRD caused confusion,[6] but on a democratic level. IRD was, after all, part of the Foreign Office and shut down partly because the foreign secretary thought such covert activity should not operate in a 'grey area' outside of SIS.[7]

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Thanks to Tom Maguire and Paul McGarr for reading an earlier draft of this. Any errors remain my own.

The IRD document reproduced below was prepared as a brief for a restricted session of Anglo-American talks on propaganda in the summer of 1960. Under Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, Britain had sought, from 1957, to develop interdependence with the United States through a series of working groups covering politics, economics, defence and covert action. The latter included operations in Indonesia, Syria, and Lebanon but many groups had fallen by the wayside by 1960 largely owing to lack of intelligence and intelligence sharing.[8] An Anglo-American Information Working Group was still in existence; here officials met to discuss covert propaganda.

The document is fairly self-explanatory, but it sheds important light on issues central to ongoing debates about propaganda, secrecy, and covert action in International Relations. Three points warrant highlighting by way of introduction.

First, it unequivocally demonstrates that Britain engaged in black propaganda and forgeries – and that the British seemingly thought they were good at it, or at least could wield it responsibly. Officials offered to take the lead over America in this difficult area, perhaps demonstrating a lingering sense of superiority in the fields of intelligence and covert action. Black radio, they noted, raised 'hideous complications'; forgeries required months of planning, intelligence, and a collection of letter-heads and signatures to copy; and even whispering campaigns necessitated meticulous planning and a separate network of 'oral agents,' perhaps to separate intelligence gathering from covert action, as using the same agents for both risked polluting intelligence-gathering channels. Again highlighting the difficulty and amount of groundwork required, all forms of black propaganda had to be based on outstanding intelligence. Despite the difficulties outlined, Britain demonstrated clear willingness to use forgeries: 'we should not hesitate to draw a bow at a venture'. The British suggested that the US take the lead on grey, or unattributable, propaganda instead.

The document even provides examples of British forgeries, usually thought of as a Soviet tactic, conducted between 1955 and 1960. British intelligence clearly thought that international front organisations, notably trade union federations such as WFTU and CTAL, were most vulnerable. Other examples listed include a 1956 pamphlet designed to look like an Egyptian government information leaflet suggesting a programme to supply oil to 'friends' and deny it to 'enemies'. The pamphlet circulated among American oil companies, but the US, whilst recognising it as black propaganda, had failed to identify the source.[9]

Second, the document is fascinating in light of recent debates about secrecy in International Relations, which unpacks deniability and examines the logic and politics of exposure.[10] The British clearly recognised that exposure 'must always be reckoned with.' Importantly, and beyond this, they recognised that secrecy was not binary. Officials differentiated between disavowable operations, which could be denied but with potential embarrassment, and black operations, which should have had 'no evidence of Western inspiration.' Exposure of the latter could paradoxically be positive because it increased publicity – so long as British sponsorship remained hidden. However, exposure could be fatal to other operations.

Black radio stations, the British assessed, could very rarely actually be black: at best they were 'disavowable.' Interestingly, this differs from academic definitions of propaganda which define the shade – white, grey or black – around the level of disinformation involved and the creation of a false source.[11] For British propagandists, definitions turned on deniability and how likely it could be traced back to the UK, even if the source was false. Under the broad banner of covert action, Britain differentiated between untraceable or black and disavowable or deniable operations. Doing so offered a more realistic understanding of plausible deniability, distinguishing secrecy from visibility.[12]

Third, understandings of success and failure are more nuanced than we might expect. Propaganda is more than about influencing a target's thinking. It can instead (or as well) disrupt the adversary by sowing confusion or division, or, more simply, preoccupy the adversary's security authorities with laborious investigations to uncover the source of a forgery. This ties in with Britain's broader approach to covert action which emphasised disrupting targets.[13]

When considering success, scholars have long debated the consequences of covert action.[14] British officials were clearly aware of the risk of blowback, and they recognised the imprecise and uncontrollable nature of forgeries in a remarkably frank manner. What is interesting here, is the optimism espoused. The British, perhaps naively, almost embraced the unpredictable consequences, believing they could lead to unforeseen success.

The deliberately imprecise objectives of covert propaganda also made measuring success difficult. This is equally striking, for it seemingly counters best practice of setting clear, reasonable and measurable objectives.[15] The approach instead emphasised picking a precise, narrow, target and then hoping for the best and seeing what happened. Measuring outcomes was difficult, but it could be achieved through 'customer research'. One such means involved covert opinion surveys designed to ascertain the effect of a particular message.[16]

The IRD sharply expanded in the early 1960s: from 227 members of staff worldwide in 1960 to a peak of 362 in 1965.[17] British special political action, more broadly, followed suit. Such operations cost £455,000 each year in the late 1950s, and officials expected this to more than triple to £1.5million in the early 1960s.[18] This document offers a useful outline of what some of that entailed.

TOP SECRET

RESTRICTED SESSION

UNITED STATES – UNITED KINGDOM INFORMATION WORKING GROUP MEETINGS

JUNE 1960

UNITED KINGDOM BRIEF

Techniques of Covert Propaganda

(A) "Black" Propaganda. (We can take the lead)

This may be divided into oral and written.

(i) Oral

Black radio is a well-established technique but raises hideous complications which make it unsuitable in exceptional circumstances. The main considerations are:-

(a) Security. It is almost impossible to conceal the location of the transmitter from R.D.F. [Radio Direction Finding]; and it is often difficult to camouflage local staff and studio arrangements. If the operation is on our own territory this means the operation becomes at best "disavowable" rather than black and a possible source of embarrassment if questions are asked in Parliament. It is therefore preferable if it can be on somebody else's territory and mobile if possible.
(b) Staff. Announcers at least must be nationals of the target country. This nearly always raises acute problems of morale, loyalty and security.
(c) Audience. There must be an audience in the target country who have the means of hearing (in spite of jamming) and are psychologically receptive to the broadcasts.
(d) Duration. Although it must be given sufficient time to attract an audience its efficacy is probably limited in time. Sooner or later the novelty wears off and the bluff is called. Nevertheless it can become quickly effective again in moments of crisis.

[p.2]

Past experience is patchy. [3 lines redacted] The communist operations against Iran, Turkey and Greece are not really "black" but have some impact in times of crisis; they represent the threat of communist power. Egyptian operations against Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon were also patchy, and in no case decisive. [half a line redacted]

Situation in Laos and Indonesia might be suitable for such operations.

Whispering campaigns can be effective, but to be done properly they require creation of separate networks of oral agents and detailed planning. We doubt if it is worth a major effort, but would use it if a suitable opportunity target appeared and a network was available.

(i) Written

We have found the chief value of "black" pamphlets and letters is more often disruption rather than propaganda, though one is not inconsistent with the other, and an essential element is exposure of some fact which the communists wish to conceal. Some examples of our operations are:-

(a) W.F.T.U. [World Federation of Trade Unions] booklet (1955)
(b) Oil pamphlet (1956)
(c) C.T.A.L. [Confederación de los Trabajadores de América Latina] questionnaire (1957)
(d) W.F.T.U. booklet (Iraq) (1960)
(e) Letter on Chinese bomb (1960)

The following considerations seem to us to be important:-

(a) Targets. These should usually be narrow, e.g. a particular organisation or delegation or individual not communism or the Russians in general. Front organisations with their international ramifications and heterogeneous staff are particularly vulnerable. But the objective itself need not be precise; once the operation is launched it is usually out of our control and its course and effects largely unpredictable (e.g. the W.F.T.U. operation succeeded in an unforeseen manner). Once we have selected a suitable target and are satisfied that a "heads we win tails you lose" situation exists we should not hesitate to draw a bow at a venture. Even if it achieves nothing else the investigation by the communists has its own disruptive effects.
(b) Intelligence. This must be 100% correct and up-to-date.

[p.3]

(c) Production. Style, paper, printing etc. must all be replicas of the genuine article. This may entail months of work. Our Missions have standing instructions to collect letter-heads, signatures etc.
(d) Distribution. Posting must be done from "likely" places, if possible according to communist precedent. Addresses should not be unnecessarily numerous but include sufficient spread to give maximum change of a successful reaction in one quarter or another. Some items may be specifically aimed at bringing information to the attention of censorship and security authorities.
(e) Exposure must always be reckoned with. Provided there are no mistakes and no evidence of Western inspiration this usually does not matter (e.g. W.F.T.U. in Vienna); it is sometimes a positive advantage because it gives further publicity (e.g. Egyptian oil pamphlet). It is important to take this into account in planning. If exposure would be fatal to an operation it is probably not worth doing.

(f) Consumer research. Assessment of results is even more difficult than usual, but special arrangements should be made if possible.

B. Unattributable (Grey) Propaganda. (We should ask the Americans to lead)

Our problems in this field are mainly of outlets. These can be roughly classified as follows:-

(i) Personal Contacts in Britain. Editors, journalists, writers, dons, etc. who receive our material and ask for briefing on specific subjects. Under this heading we have a panel of letter writers on various subjects.
(ii) Personal Contacts Abroad. Information Officers mainly but also other member of Missions [1 line redacted] have similar contacts according to local conditions. Some of these contacts receive payments.
(iii) Control of Existing Newspapers and Magazines. This can vary from full clandestine ownership (e.g. Gulf Times) to partial control. This is expensive and complicated; it is therefore a pis aller.
(iv) Control of News Agencies, e.g. A.N.A. [Arab News Agency], N.A.F.E.N. [Near and Far East News Agency], STAR [focused on Pakistan] also expensive, and value [is] often only indirect and pre-emptive according to circumstances. They cannot and should not try to compete with the giants (A.P. [Associated Press], U.P. [United Press], Reuters, etc.). But they can provide special background material which the giants don't. They should therefore be allowed to operate where conditions are suitable, i.e. they are not "good in themselves."

[p.4]

(v) Special Productions, e.g. "Bulletin of International Committee for the Investigation of Communist Front Organisations". This is mainly a device for using a notional organisation to circulate semi-secret intelligence about "front" organisations. It has been remarkably successful.
(vi) Control of Non-Communist Organisations. We share interests with the Americans in many of these, e.g. COSEC [Co-ordinating Secretariat of National Unions of Students], W.V.F. [World Veterans' Federation], Congress of Cultural Freedom etc. They are very useful and some have their own publicity organs (e.g. Encounter etc.). There are also other organisations in the international field under varying degrees of control and influence which are useful in making a positive approach on a non-governmental plane. This may be important in Africa, and indeed wherever nationalism in hypersensitive.

Notes

1. The National Archives (all archival references are from the UK National Archives) unless stated: IRD, "United Kingdom Brief: Techniques of Covert Propaganda," June 1960, FCO 168/19.
2. IRD, "Information Research Department," Appendix A, "Evolution of IRD," 1970, FCO 79/182. See also Defty, *Britain, America and Anti-Communist Propaganda* and James Vaughan, *Unconquerable Minds.*
3. IRD, "Information Research Department (IRD)," attached to Reddaway to Johnson, "Information Inspection: Future of Information Research Department," 29 July 1970, FCO 79/182.
4. Davies, *MI6 and the Machinery of Spying*, 192, 227.
5. Directorate of Forward Plans, "Counter-Subversion Structure: Annex D – Interdepartmental Review Committee," 27 July 1966, DEFE 28/146.
6. Glass, "Tour of Latin America," 8 March 1963, FO1110/1615; Barclay to Boas, 13 September 1963, FO 1110/1615; Directorate of Forward Plans, "Counter-Subversion Structure: Annex D – Interdepartmental Review Committee," 27 July 1966, DEFE 28/146.
7. Owen, *Time to Declare*, 348.
8. Ashton, "Harold Macmillan and the 'Golden Days'," 700; Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser*, 137; and Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny*, 140.

9. Vaughan, *Unconquerable Minds*, 215.
10. See for example, Carson, "Facing off and Saving Face"; Carson and Yarhi-Milo, "Covert Communication"; and Joseph and Poznansky, "Media Technology, Covert Action, and the Politics of Exposure."
11. See, for example, Turner, "An Appraisal of the Effects of Secret Propaganda," 112. He defines black propaganda as "the purposeful manipulation of the perceptions of a target audience through the use of disinformation or deception." Likewise, for Jowett and O'Donnell it is propaganda "which is credited to a false source and spread[s] lies, fabrications and deceptions." See *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 18.
12. Cormac and Aldrich, "Grey is the New Black," 484.
13. See Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny*.
14. Treverton wrote of blowback as early as 1987 (see *Covert Action*). More recently political scientists have examined longer-term effects of covert electoral interference and covert regime change. See, respectively, Levin, "A Vote for Freedom?"; and O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change*.
15. Daugherty, *Executive Secrets*, 47.
16. Private information.
17. "Information Research Department," Appendix A, "Evolution of IRD"; and Appendix B, "Total IRD Staff for years 1952-1970," 1970, FCO 79/182.
18. Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny*, 130.

Disclosure statement

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