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The Pinprick Approach

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❖ Rory Cormac

Introduction

With the prospect of a direct U.S.-Soviet military confrontation inhibited by the advent of nuclear deterrence, the Cold War became in part an intelligence war. The multifaceted role of intelligence, however, extended far beyond the passive realm of watching the Communist militaries and counting their nuclear warheads. Intelligence also encompassed an active event-shaping dimension. Academic (and popular) literature is replete with discussions of the active use of intelligence agencies in the context of U.S. and Soviet Cold War policies, notably the covert exploits of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Soviet State Security Committee (KGB).¹ By contrast, analyses of British intelligence have traditionally been limited to the passive sphere.² Yet, for the British, as for the Americans, covert operations, propaganda, and subversion quickly became the weapons of choice.

1. For recent examples of broader overviews, see James Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War: US Policy, Intelligence, and CIA Operations* (London: IB Tauris, 2010); Sarah-Jane Corke, *US Covert Operations and Cold War Strategy: Truman, Secret Warfare, and the CIA, 1945–1953* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009). There is also a great deal of literature on the CIA covering specific aspects of Cold War covert action. For examples, see A. Ross Johnson, *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty: The CIA Years and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010); and Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 1999).

2. Although British intelligence has been the subject of a great deal of excellent scholarship over the last twenty years, it has traditionally been understood as a predominantly passive entity. See, for example, Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in War and Peace* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), which, despite being a superb, ground-breaking book, contains little mention of special operations within the context of intelligence (perhaps in part because Herman's role as a former senior British intelligence official might curtail his leeway to discuss such matters publicly).

Toward the end of the 1940s, as the East-West ideological conflict intensified, the central role of intelligence became increasingly apparent to senior officials in Whitehall, especially within the Ministry of Defence and extending to the very top of government. Clement Attlee, Britain's first Cold War prime minister, is traditionally portrayed as a skeptic of the merits of covert activity—someone reluctant to become embroiled in a murky world he associated with the dirty tricks used by the Bolsheviks.³ The common view is that after a brief and reluctant flirtation with covert operations (involving an abortive attempt to aid anti-Communist guerrillas in Albania), Attlee shied away from such provocative tactics.⁴ However, recently declassified top-secret papers challenge this orthodoxy. Under Attlee's premiership, the British government relied on covert action on a striking (and hitherto unacknowledged) geographic scale from Europe to the Far East and Southeast Asia, from the Middle East to even Latin America.⁵ Attlee oversaw a covert action strategy that lasted until the dying days of his premiership and that went on to influence future British administrations.

Focusing on covert activity behind the Iron Curtain, this article argues that far from shying away from covert operations in the aftermath of the Albanian misadventure, the British government simply changed tactics. The article reveals, for the first time, how a select group of senior Whitehall officials, including the chief of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), devised a new strategy for covert operations behind the Iron Curtain: the "pinprick approach." This concept was approved by the prime minister himself in December 1950. The pinprick approach saw the number of operations increase at the start of the 1950s, although they were of a more limited nature than previous failed attempts to liberate Albania.

This article begins by briefly outlining the evolution of British covert action strategy in the formative years of the Cold War. From 1947 to 1950,

3. Richard J. Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America, and Cold War Secret Intelligence* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2002), p. 79. This view can perhaps be traced back to a ground-breaking, influential article by John Zamecica and Raymond Smith in the 1980s. The authors attempted to reconceptualize Attlee and argued that his "cold warrior clothes tailored by the orthodox school of history [which, according to the authors, saw Attlee as a Cold Warrior par excellence] appeared extremely ill-fitting." See Raymond Smith and John Zamecica, "The Cold Warrior: Clement Attlee Reconsidered, 1945–7," *International Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Spring 1985), p. 237.

4. Philip Davies, *MI6 and the Machinery of Spying* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), p. 219; and Richard J. Aldrich, "British Intelligence and the Anglo-American 'Special Relationship' during the Cold War," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (July 1998), pp. 339–340.

5. See, for example, the agenda of a meeting of the Official Committee on Communism (Overseas), or AC(O), in the autumn of 1950, which covers Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, in AC(O) Minutes, 6 September 1950, in The National Archives (TNA) of the United Kingdom, CAB 134/4, AC(O)(50)25th Meeting. The papers of the AC(O) found in TNA, CAB 134/2–4, are remarkably broad in geographical scope. In the interests of space, this article focuses exclusively on activity in Central and Eastern Europe.

British thinking was somewhat muddled and encompassed caution, liberation, and national deviationism. The article then provides the first detailed account of the creation and functioning of a new counter-subversion body—the Official Committee on Communism (Overseas) or AC(O), which was designed to take the offensive against the Soviet Union in the clandestine Cold War. The next section uses recent archival releases to explore the new pinprick approach to covert action. I first consider the approach as a whole and then focus on certain schemes, showing how the new approach fit into the transatlantic relationship. Finally, the article assesses the strategic coherence of the AC(O) and the pinprick approach, as well as their impact on British Cold War strategy. The article shows that the Attlee government planned covert operations behind the Iron Curtain to a greater extent than has hitherto been acknowledged, that British officials had an overarching strategy for fighting the secret war, and that even though certain flaws in the AC(O) ultimately led to its dissolution, the clandestine body proved a useful step in the right direction.

The Muddled Evolution of Covert Action

The British government was cautious at the outbreak of the Cold War. No lasting consensus emerged between the diplomats and the military about the scale of the threat. Not until July 1948 did the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) assert that the Soviet Union was an expansionist power driven by a militant ideology with the aim of eliminating capitalism.⁶ The prime minister initially tended to downplay the Soviet threat and apparently did not make up his mind about its severity until 1947.⁷ Although certain officials, particularly within the military (but also in the Foreign Office), pushed hard for the use of covert operations against the emerging Communist threat shortly after the end of the Second World War, senior politicians did not authorize any substantial expansion of such activity until 1948.⁸ Debates about the necessity

6. Percy Cradock, *Know Your Enemy: How the Joint Intelligence Committee Saw the World* (London: John Murray, 2002), pp. 26–27.

7. For discussions about Attlee's evolving attitudes toward the Soviet Union and the Cold War, see Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Minister: The Office and Its Holders since 1945* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 166–167; Francis Beckett, *Clem Attlee: A Biography* (London: Richard Cohen, 1997), p. 231; Robert Pearce, *Attlee* (Essex, UK: Longman, 1997), p. 164; and Mark Phythian, *The Labour Party, War and International Relations, 1945–2006* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 25.

8. John Slessor of the Royal Air Force was particularly vocal in his lobbying for aggressive forms of covert action. Slessor pushed for “using every weapon from bribery to kidnapping—anything short of assassination.” Continuing along this vein over the coming year, Slessor's arguments increasingly irritated Ernest Bevin. His zeal, the foreign secretary later moaned to Attlee, had “rather outrun both his knowledge and his judgement.” See John Slessor to Basil Liddell Hart, 22 January 1948, in TNA, AIR

and utility of covert action were very much framed within the ongoing argument between the Foreign Office and the military about the Soviet threat. Threat assessments were vital when considering covert action, for such operations were a risky business, to be employed only when necessary.

A further framework shaping the debate was the legacy of the Second World War. Britain had gained valuable experience in covert action through the Special Operations Executive (SOE), created in 1940 with orders to “set Europe ablaze.” But as the war wound down, heated debate surrounded the future of special operations. Although senior military and SOE figures pressed for the continuation of such activity within a single entity, the diplomats triumphed and SOE was dissolved, with any residual capabilities being absorbed by MI6.⁹ The Foreign Office had acquired control over the peacetime use of special operations. The chiefs of staff feared that the diplomats intended to use their newfound veto “rather drastically.”¹⁰ Sir Alexander Cadogan, the permanent undersecretary at the Foreign Office, failed to dampen these worries when he stated that “the requirements of war or of an ‘amber’ light period were totally different from what would be reasonable in peacetime.”¹¹ Despite British wartime successes in special operations, Foreign Office control ensured a more cautious postwar approach.

As the Cold War heated up, Whitehall undertook an increase in propaganda activities, albeit with severe limitations. Attlee’s foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, had banned the use of propaganda to incite subversion in countries already under Communist control and initially limited his support to propaganda that highlighted the UK’s positive achievements rather than anything that criticized the Soviet Union.¹² Vetoing ideas for a peacetime psychological warfare unit in 1946, Bevin made clear that he preferred a more positive option extolling the virtues of Britain as “the Third Force.” That is, he wanted to promote Labour’s brand of Social Democracy as a rose between the thornier (and ideologically more rigid) Soviet Union and United States.¹³ Meanwhile,

75/116; and Ernest Bevin to Clement Attlee, 19 April 1949, in TNA, PREM 8/1365, PM/49/69. Certain figures within the Foreign Office, however, were also pushing for a more forward approach. See, for example, Christopher Warner’s report calling for a “defensive-offensive” policy: Christopher Warner, “The Soviet Campaign against This Country and Our Response to It,” 2 April 1946, in TNA, FO 371/56832.

9. For a more detailed overview, see Keith Jeffery, *MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), pp. 626–630; and Philip Davies, “From Special Operations to Special Political Action: The ‘Rump’ SOE and SIS Post-War Covert Action Capability, 1945–1977,” *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2002), pp. 55–76.

10. Chiefs of Staff, “Extract from Conclusion of COS(46)12th Meeting, held on 23rd January 1946,” in TNA, AIR 19/816.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand*, p. 151.

13. Stephen Dorril, *MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 72.

the chairman of Whitehall's newly-formed Russia Committee, which was designed to coordinate Soviet policy, urged restraint. He called for the need to restrict covert action to "the really essential cases and countries."¹⁴

Encompassing the Communist seizure of power in Czechoslovakia and the start of the Berlin blockade, the year 1948 saw a marked intensification of the Cold War. With increasingly stark intelligence assessments emerging about an expansionist USSR, covert action became a more attractive option for Britain's senior politicians and diplomats.¹⁵ By the end of 1948 ambitious liberation operations were on the agenda. Although Whitehall officials still deemed it "not worth while" to target the Soviet Union itself, the Russia Committee (which by then included a representative of the combative Chiefs of Staff) secretly pondered how to foment a civil war behind the Iron Curtain, agreeing that "our aim should certainly be to liberate the countries within the Soviet Orbit by any means short of war."¹⁶ They deemed Albania an appropriate target, not least because the Soviet-Yugoslav schism had isolated Albania geographically from the Soviet bloc. Both Attlee and Bevin actively supported the idea.¹⁷ The prime minister called for the bribery of significant Albanian personalities in order to undermine the regime, and Bevin advocated "any suitable means" to harass the regime and ultimately to "detach Albania from the Orbit."¹⁸ Moreover, planning for liberation in Albania did not exist in isolation. The intelligence historian Richard Aldrich has revealed that by 1948, MI6 (in conjunction with its U.S. counterparts) had begun to make serious efforts to exploit resistance movements in Soviet Ukraine and Poland.¹⁹

Liberation notoriously failed, however. Consequently, British thinking about covert activity had to adapt. After the ill-fated dalliance with liberation, confusion again arose about parameters and how far the British should go. Indeed, the Whitehall files demonstrate a lack of clear thinking and much contradiction among various officials. Within the Foreign Office, a planning body known as the Permanent Under-Secretary's Committee (PUSC) outlined an innovative approach in the summer of 1949: to encourage national deviationism.²⁰ The idea was to act quickly and foster nationalist resistance in

14. Russia Committee Minutes, 18 June 1946, in TNA, FO 371/56885.

15. Cradock, *Know Your Enemy*, pp. 26–27.

16. "Report of the Sub-committee Set Up to Examine the Problem of Planning in Relation to Policy towards the Soviet Union and the Soviet Orbit," 14 December 1948, in TNA, FO 371/70272, RC(25)48; and Russia Committee Minutes, 25 November 1948, in TNA, FO 371/1687.

17. Jeffery, *MI6*, p. 712.

18. Attlee, handwritten note on William Strang to Attlee, 26 March 1949, in TNA, FO 800/437; Strang to Attlee, 26 March 1949, in TNA, FO 800/437; and Russia Committee Minutes, 15 February 1949, in TNA, FO 371/77623.

19. Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand*, pp. 165–166.

20. The PUSC was a planning body ostensibly considering long-term policy. Its discussions were more

those areas into which the Soviet Union had expanded but had not yet fully consolidated a Communist political system.²¹ The PUSC hoped this approach would obstruct the Sovietization of Eastern Europe.

Demonstrating the confused thinking within Whitehall, the PUSC proposal came just weeks after other officials were reaffirming the ban on subversive activity behind the Iron Curtain.²² Elsewhere in Whitehall, more hawkish Cold Warriors continued to call for “such measures as the promotion of defection and sabotage, and the encouragement of dissident and resistance groups.”²³ By contrast, the Foreign Office sought only to “weaken the Soviet grip on the European satellite States before their peoples become so imbued with Soviet propaganda as to follow the lead of the Soviet Government without demur.” Tactics to achieve this goal were to include, among other things, “covert activities.” Instead of liberation, therefore, Britain sought to undermine the Soviet Union and “to encourage the emergence of ‘national deviationism’ in the other orbit countries.” Although “every opportunity should be taken to weaken Russian control over the satellite States,” the Foreign Office explicitly stated that “actions involving a serious risk of war or likely to encourage futile resistance should be avoided.”²⁴ The British approach to covert action had thus reached a crossroads.

Britain’s Covert Action Committee

In December 1949 a new, highly secretive Whitehall committee was created: the Official Committee on Communism (Overseas). The AC(O), or Jebb Committee as it became known, was so highly classified that its functions and papers have only recently come to light (albeit with heavy redactions).²⁵ The AC(O) was joined by a ministerial equivalent, the Ministerial Committee on

sensitive than the committee acknowledged, however, for it served the Permanent Under-Secretary’s Department (PUSD). Subsuming the functions of the wartime Services Liaison Department, the PUSD was created by Bevin in 1949 and enjoyed responsibility over intelligence and other covert matters. See Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand*, p. 157.

21. “British Policy towards Soviet Communism,” 28 July 1949, in TNA, FO 800/503, PUSC(31)Final.

22. The government resolved in June 1949 that “present policy was not to permit any subversive activities in the Iron Curtain countries.” See Cabinet Committee on Communism Minutes, 7 June 1949, in TNA, CAB 134/53, C(49)3rd Meeting.

23. “British Policy towards Russia and Planning in Connexion with Policy towards Russia: Memorandum by the Russia Committee,” 8 June 1949, in TNA, CAB 134/53, C(49)5.

24. “British Policy towards Soviet Communism,” 28 July 1949.

25. Credit should also go to Chikara Hashimoto, a doctoral candidate at Aberystwyth University, for his efforts in getting some of the material declassified. The designation “Jebb Committee” refers to the committee’s Foreign Office chairman, Gladwyn Jebb. In 1950 the committee became known as the Dixon Committee when Sir Pierson Dixon took it over.

Communism, or AC(M).²⁶ These two influential bodies instantly became integral to Britain's covert Cold War and represented what one official described as the government "turning towards the idea of competing with the Kremlin in the matter of subversion."²⁷ Yet, owing to their intense secrecy, the two bodies have so far escaped any serious discussion in the literature.

Operating at the civil servant level, the AC(O) was maintained at extreme levels of secrecy. At one point Norman Brook, the cabinet secretary, even felt the need to curb the practice of informally referring to the committee by its chairman's name. Given the committee's highly sensitive business, association with a particular person could cause both embarrassment and potential security risks. The AC(O) was charged with stimulating, coordinating, and initiating the UK's anti-Communist activities overseas. The files of this Cold War covert action committee, despite being heavily redacted, form an indubitable gold mine of political warfare, counter-subversion, and special operations. The AC(O) met at least monthly throughout 1950. Although set up as an interdepartmental committee, it was kept as small as possible. The committee brought together only a handful of the most senior Cold Warriors from the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Chiefs of Staff, and MI6. One such member was the JIC chairman, Patrick Reilly. His inclusion started an interesting pattern linking the JIC chairman to covert action. By the 1960s later heads of the JIC were chairing a shadowy successor to the AC(O) known as the Joint Action Committee.²⁸ The line between intelligence and covert action in the British system was somewhat blurred.

As covert action expanded, however, and as more departments learned about the AC(O)'s existence, representatives from the Commonwealth Relations Office, the Colonial Office, and MI5 became "constant attenders" of the committee's meetings as of July 1950, June 1951, and February 1953, respectively. The AC(O) considered various schemes, and those it recommended were submitted to the ministerial committee for approval. Once approved, the action was sent back to the AC(O), which assigned the requisite tasks to the relevant department or departments.²⁹

26. A corresponding committee dealing with Communism at home was established the following year after initially being rejected. The papers of the Official Committee on Communism (Home) can be found in TNA, CAB 134/737-40.

27. John Ward (Foreign Office) to Air Marshall William Elliott, Attached: "'Deception' Organisation," 20 February 1950, in TNA, DEFE 28/1.

28. Rory Cormac, "Coordinating Covert Action: The Case of the Yemen Civil War and the South Arabian Insurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 5 (2013), pp. 692-717; and Richard J. Aldrich, Rory Cormac, and Michael S. Goodman, eds., *Spying on the World: The Declassified Documents of the Joint Intelligence Committee, 1936-2013* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 427-428.

29. "Draft Memorandum for Communication by HM Minister in Washington to the US Authorities Concerning Anglo-US Cooperation in Anti-Communist Activities," 13 February 1950, in TNA,

The AC(M), sitting above the AC(O), was chaired by Prime Minister Attlee and included Labour heavyweights Lord President Herbert Morrison, Foreign Secretary Bevin, Chancellor of the Exchequer Hugh Dalton, and Minister of Defence A. V. Alexander. Highly secretive and meeting only rarely, the AC(M) was charged with the general supervision of major policy relating to anti-Communist activities.³⁰

The Pinprick Strategy

National archives are veritable treasure troves of material, and declassifications can unearth whole new committees. Such discoveries can excite the historian, but the *so what* question remains. What impact did the AC(O) have on British covert strategy in the early 1950s? What were its strengths and weaknesses? What does it reveal about Whitehall's conceptualization of the Cold War and the place of covert operations within it? Fortunately, the committee's papers help us to answer these questions, shedding valuable light on Britain's approach to covert action.

Despite the failed operation in Albania in the late 1940s, which underlined the strategic incoherence of liberation, proposals for covert schemes increased in 1950 under the direction of the AC(O). Even though the Soviet Union's acquisition of nuclear weapons in August 1949 had underlined the dangers of provocation and escalation, the UK was going on the counter-offensive. British officials called for a full exploration of possible actions and put out a call for covert action proposals to British missions across the world. They were "ready to consider any scheme" from Ankara to Warsaw, from Bangkok to Santiago.³¹ Heads of missions overseas were informed that

for some time we have been thinking about extending the scope of our anti-communist activities overseas into fields other than those of propaganda, and have been considering what could be done by economic and other means (not excluding subversive and clandestine operations) to forestall and counteract the

CAB 21/2750, AC(O)(50)3; and AC(O) Minutes, 25 January 1950, in TNA, CAB 134/4, AC(O)(50)1st Meeting.

30. "Composition and Terms of Reference," 31 December 1949, in TNA, CAB 21/2992, AC(M)(49)1.

31. "Planning Staff for Cold War Activities," 19 July 1950, in TNA, CAB 134/3, AC(O)(50)35; AC(O) Minutes, 26 May 1950, in TNA, CAB 134/3, AC(O)(50)17th Meeting; "Planning Staff for Cold War Activities," Attached: "Draft Letter to Heads of Missions," 19 July 1950, in TNA, CAB 134/3, AC(O)(50)35; and AC(O) Minutes, 7 June 1950, in TNA, CAB 134/3, AC(O)(50)19th Meeting.

spread of Communism, and to hamper the activities of Communist Parties and Governments, wherever such intervention seems likely to yield dividends.³²

Crucially, however, the strategy had evolved, and the increase in schemes had come in terms of number rather than ambition. The new approach was less provocative, of lesser scope, and of narrower objective than the earlier Albanian operation. Indeed, British covert activity in 1950 and 1951 was characterized by “pinpricks.” The pinprick approach, apparently coined by MI6 Chief Stewart Menzies in February 1950 and endorsed by the AC(O) the same month, was adopted to test proposals for covert action and gradually chip away at Soviet control by exploiting political weaknesses, targeting economic vulnerabilities, promoting dissension, and spreading distrust.³³ The hope was that limited strikes against select targets in individual countries would sow the seeds of dissension. The aim was not liberation (although the UK remained keen to maintain a spirit of resistance behind the Iron Curtain) 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.”³⁴ With few resources and an inherent caution, the new strategy was more cost-efficient and less risky than either launching an ambitious covert intervention to liberate a satellite state or directly attacking the Soviet Union itself. Instead, Menzies built on an earlier idea that “getting at individual satellite territories” would offer the best chance of “weakening the whole Soviet system.”³⁵

Covert schemes against the Soviet bloc increased—but with less scope for escalation to a global nuclear war. Regarding clandestine economic action, for example, the British government did not fear reprisals per se. The Soviet Union was already doing everything it could to damage British economic growth. No one in Whitehall feared that Moscow would resort to a nuclear strike over small-scale economic operations in Czechoslovakia.³⁶ More broadly, the pinprick approach was cautious and incremental in nature, thereby reducing the risk of provocation, escalation, and retaliation. The approach involved experiments and pilot schemes with limited objectives to test and probe the target in order to determine whether conditions were favorable

32. “Planning Staff for Cold War Activities,” Attached: “Draft Letter to Heads of Missions,” 19 July 1950.

33. AC(O) Minutes, 15 February 1950, in TNA, CAB 134/4, AC(O)(50)4th Meeting.

34. “The Work of the Official Committee on Communism (Overseas),” 23 June 1951, in TNA, CAB 134/2, AC(M)(51)4.

35. “Report of the Sub-committee Set Up to Examine the Problem of Planning in Relation to Policy towards the Soviet Union and the Soviet Orbit,” 14 December 1948.

36. AC(O) Minutes, 9 March 1950, in TNA, CAB 134/4, AC(O)(50)7th Meeting.

for successful covert action.³⁷ Covert activity was to be conducted behind the Iron Curtain on a small scale, but “it might, if properly carried out, lead to greater things in the future.” Therefore senior officials looked into “certain minor practical activities” recommended by MI6. “There was nothing to lose by such activities, and if successful, they might well throw grit into the machine of the Communist regimes.”³⁸

Accordingly, the committee described its proposals as “necessarily limited in scope” and “in the nature of an experiment.”³⁹ Brook informed Attlee that the proposals were on a modest scale and were put forward as “the most likely activities to produce a reasonable return for the money and effort expended on them.” Attlee was informed that, if successful, the AC(O) would make further proposals for an extension of covert action based on the results.⁴⁰ Brook submitted the AC(O)’s proposals, which were treated with “special secrecy,” to Attlee and his AC(M) in mid-December 1950.⁴¹ Within a week the ministerial committee had approved them.⁴² The new strategy was under way.

This British brand of covert action explicitly did not involve violent special operations and sabotage, the type of which was conducted by the SOE during World War II.⁴³ Diplomats associated such action with the wartime context and deemed it inappropriate for peacetime. Caution existed for practical reasons too. JIC Chairman Patrick Reilly, one of the Foreign Office’s leading lights in intelligence and covert activity, ruled out physical sabotage against Czechoslovak factories. This was for the simple (and valid) reason that it “would probably lead to savage reprisals.”⁴⁴ Eighteen months earlier, the Russia Committee had recommended “the promotion of . . . sabotage,” but in the period after Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons, pinpricks were very much the way forward.⁴⁵

The pinprick approach that took shape under Attlee outlasted his admin-

37. AC(O) Minutes, 15 February 1950.

38. *Ibid.*

39. “Proposed Activities behind the Iron Curtain” (Third Revise), November 1950, in TNA, CAB 21/2750, AC(O)(50)52.

40. Brook to Attlee, “Meeting of the Ministerial Committee on Communism, 21st December 1950,” 20 December 1950, in TNA, PREM 8/1365.

41. “Anti-Communist Activities in Europe,” 15 December 1950, in TNA, CAB 132/2, AC(M)(50)1.

42. Prime Minister’s Office to Cliffe (Secretary of AC(O)), 21 December 1950, in TNA, PREM 8/1365; and “Anti-Communist Activities in Europe,” 22 December 1950, in TNA, CAB 134/2, AC(M)(50)2.

43. “Proposed Activities behind the Iron Curtain” (Third Revise), November 1950; and Cliffe to Brook, 20 December 1950, Attached: “Brief for Prime Minister Ahead of AC(M) Meeting,” in TNA, CAB 21/5003.

44. AC(O) Minutes, 1 March 1950, in TNA, CAB 134/4, AC(O)(50)6th Meeting.

45. “British Policy towards Russia and Planning in Connexion with Policy towards Russia: Memorandum by the Russia Committee,” 8 June 1949.

istration. Similar ideas informed Foreign Office thinking in the early months of Winston Churchill's second premiership. Outlining Britain's approach to covert activity to his U.S. counterparts in December 1951, Patrick Reilly warned that "the British were inclined to think that at this dangerous time the Soviets should not be 'pushed too far' in those areas [the satellite states], which might cause violent reactions by the USSR." The new Conservative government, according to Reilly, had realized that it needed to be "extremely careful," a point accentuated by internal British politics during the 1951 election campaign. Churchill had been accused by Labour of leading "a gang of war mongers."⁴⁶

Similarly, in a memorandum of early 1952 that angered U.S. officials for being too complacent, static, and timid, the Foreign Office differentiated between mass uprisings and "a series of specialist operations against specific targets."⁴⁷ The former was off the table, but the latter—an articulation of the pinprick approach—was very much on it. "These targets," the diplomats explained, "would be the Communist Government machine in the various countries of the orbit including the Soviet Union and above all the Soviet Army, which is, in the last resort, the essential factor in holding together the Soviet empire."⁴⁸ Having listed the dangers and disadvantages of liberation operations, the PUSC concluded that "none of the foregoing objections to mass resistance movements applies at any stage to specialist operations designed either to disrupt the machinery of government or the economic structure of the satellite States, or to poison relations between the satellite Governments and the Soviet Union."⁴⁹

Numerous schemes spanning much of the range of covert options came into fruition from late 1950. These included political action, economic action, and black propaganda. One of the early schemes approved by Bevin was covert activity against the German police (*Volkspolizei*) in the Soviet Zone of Germany.⁵⁰ This involved attempts to erode the morale of officers, combined with measures to "incriminate the senior officers in the eyes of the Russian

46. Robert Joyce, "Final Meeting in London with British Foreign Office and SIS Representatives," 20 December 1951, in U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Record Group (RG) 59, Box 6, 1951–53, Executive Secretariat, Psychological Strategy Board Working File. I am indebted to Thomas Maguire for sharing documents from the Psychological Strategy Board with me.

47. "Comments on 'Future Policy towards Russia,'" US Psychological Strategy Board, n.d. (early 1952), in NARA, RG59, Box 6, 1951–53, Executive Secretariat, Psychological Strategy Board Working File.

48. "Future Policy towards Soviet Russia," 17 January 1952, in TNA, FO 371/25002, PUSC(15)16.

49. "Future Policy towards Soviet Russia: Annex B, Liberation of the Satellites," 17 January 1952, in TNA, FO 371/25002, PUSC(15)16.

50. AC(O) Minutes, 16 October 1950, in TNA, CAB 134/4, AC(O)(50)27th Meeting.

security police.” Through such measures, the British hoped to “undermine the confidence of the Russians in the loyalty and efficiency of this force.”⁵¹ Other clandestine schemes targeted Soviet forces in Austria and Germany. Local nationals were employed on a program to spread dissension among the “Red Armies of Occupation.” To achieve this, “real or ‘notional’ dissident groups” were set up to distribute clandestine propaganda designed to “mislead and confuse” the security services and encourage defection.⁵²

Pinpricks extended to economic action. Measures against individual satellite economies used as part of a broader policy of overt pressure, would, British officials hoped, yield profitable results. Accordingly (and again demonstrating the tentative and incremental approach to covert activity), the AC(O) called for a pilot operation against one country. The pilot operation, according to Patrick Reilly, ensured that British efforts would not be scattered or overextended at the outset. The pilot-scheme approach was also sensible because such covert action was uncharted territory for the British in peacetime. Even the most senior officials planning covert action acknowledged that they “could not have any real idea of what operations would be effective in the satellite countries until [they are] tried.” This approach thus provided a valuable opportunity for the British to learn “the technique and limitations of the business.”⁵³

Czechoslovakia was chosen as the target of the “experiment” because it was deemed particularly important to the Soviet Union but offered the easiest chance of success for the British. Suggestions included encouraging industry to “go slow,” encouraging defections among technicians, attacking the currency, and making capital out of the government-sponsored return of Germans from the Eastern Zone of the Sudetenland.⁵⁴ The Joint Intelligence Bureau and the Foreign Office’s Economic Intelligence Department were subsequently asked to draw up a list of weak spots in the Czechoslovak economy that could be exploited by “direct action.”⁵⁵

The extent to which this effort proceeded is unclear, but by 1951 ministers had approved proposals “to hamper the activities of Communist Governments in the economic field.”⁵⁶ Discussion had begun about covert preemptive or selective buying at the start of the year. A tactic associated with

51. “Proposed Activities behind the Iron Curtain” (Third Revise), November 1950.

52. *Ibid.*

53. AC(O) Minutes, 1 March 1950.

54. *Ibid.*

55. AC(O) Minutes, 15 March 1950, in TNA, CAB 134/4, AC(O)(50)8th Meeting.

56. “The Work of the Official Committee on Communism (Overseas),” 23 June 1951.

economic warfare, selective buying was not deemed an option to be used regularly. MI6 confirmed, however, that such action would work in exceptional circumstances and that in some cases “the western authorities can either by open purchase, or covertly, through reliable intermediaries, cause considerable embarrassment to Eastern European purchasing agencies and upset the economy of the Soviet Orbit in Europe.”⁵⁷

Such discussion and any associated action took place against the workings of the newly-formed Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (COCOM), which restricted exports to Communist countries.⁵⁸ Meeting for the first time in January 1950, COCOM included Britain, the United States, and seventeen other Western countries and was designed to coordinate Allied export controls. The idea of economic warfare was, however, beset with disagreements. Internally, the British Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office sought an embargo on anything that could contribute to Soviet war potential, whereas the economic departments sought to limit the banned list to military equipment (Britain relied on timber and grain from Eastern Europe). Externally, disagreements existed between London and Washington about the aggressiveness of the action—with the former preferring a modest strategic embargo.⁵⁹

The British government sought to develop secret channels of communication to permit disruptive operations in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and probably Poland. This involved the dissemination of black propaganda “ostensibly produced by dissident elements inside the countries concerned,” as well as “publications produced by refugee groups and apparently disseminated by their own organisations.” On top of this, whispering campaigns designed to compromise Communist officials were ready to be implemented.⁶⁰

The use of propaganda, which was integral to the pinprick approach, demonstrated a sense of continuity throughout the Attlee years. The Information Research Department (the Foreign Office’s propaganda unit) had been created earlier in 1948. Propaganda operations provided their own attacks on Communism but were also often used in conjunction with other forms of covert political and economic activity to ensure that schemes worked most effectively. In this sense, black propaganda can be seen as a means of facilitating covert action. For example, propaganda was planned in conjunction with the

57. “Selective Buying,” Draft Memorandum by the Overseas Planning Section, n.d. (ca. January 1951), in TNA, CAB 21/2750.

58. Alan P. Dobson, “From Instrumental to Expressive: The Changing Goals of the U.S. Cold War Strategic Embargo,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 98–119.

59. Dorril, *MI6*, p. 488.

60. “Proposed Activities behind the Iron Curtain” (Third Revise), November 1950.

economic pilot scheme in Czechoslovakia to try to encourage “go slow” tendencies in Czechoslovak industry.⁶¹ This idea worked the other way around as well—special operations were designed to facilitate propaganda. Such tactics were intended “to ensure that Western and United Nations propaganda reaches the population of the Satellite countries despite radio jamming.”⁶² Meanwhile, whispering campaigns to exploit unfolding situations and to compromise high-ranking officials were also kept as an option—although this applied more to the Soviet zones of Germany and Austria than to Czechoslovakia.⁶³ The idea continued to feature prominently under the Conservative government.

Black propaganda, and covert operations more broadly, sought to exploit what officials described as Communist “contradictions” or rifts. Czechoslovakia again offers an instructive example. According to British intelligence, exploitable disagreements existed between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia over economic development. Soviet policy had caused a worsening of Czechoslovakia’s foreign exchange position and had distorted the Czechoslovak economy (from consumer goods to heavy industry) to suit Moscow’s own requirements, a source of frustration in Prague.⁶⁴ Hence, British activity included subversive propaganda to worsen relations with the USSR in the economic field. Whitehall hoped to sow fissures in the Soviet bloc by finding and publicizing information that had been withheld by Soviet leaders from at least some of the East European countries.⁶⁵

Britain’s Pinprick Strategy and the Transatlantic Alliance

The disagreement between Britain and the United States during the early Cold War over the virtues of covert action is well-established in the literature and need not be repeated here. Suffice to say that Britain’s cautious approach placed London at loggerheads with more ambitious U.S. thinking, leaving British strategy consciously attempting to “exert a moderating influence [on the United States] so as to ensure that full account is taken at each stage of the

61. AC(O) Minutes, 31 March 1950, in TNA, CAB 134/4, AC(O)(50)10th Meeting.

62. “Proposed Activity behind the Iron Curtain” (Third Revise), November 1950.

63. *Ibid.*

64. “Report of the Sub-committee Set Up to Examine the Problem of Planning in Relation to Policy towards the Soviet Union and the Soviet Orbit: Appendix B—Satellite Contradictions,” 14 December 1948, in TNA, FO 371/70272, RC(25)48.

65. “Proposed Activity behind the Iron Curtain” (Third Revise), November 1950.

risks involved.”⁶⁶ Not that this made much difference. Although Churchill warned U.S. officials not to stir anything in Eastern Europe that could not be backed up by the West with force if necessary, officials in Washington defiantly asserted: “We are going ahead with our general plans in this matter, regardless of British approval.”⁶⁷

Disagreements aside, the AC(O), like the Russia Committee before it, was specifically instructed to maintain close liaison with Washington.⁶⁸ U.S. officials were informed about the existence of the AC(O) reasonably shortly after it was established—certainly much sooner than other British government departments such as the Colonial Office were informed. The U.S. State Department learned in February 1950 that “subject to the overriding necessity of securing Ministerial approval for schemes that the Official Committee recommend, the Committee would wish to cooperate with the competent United States authorities, both in the exchange of views and in the formulation of specific plans.”⁶⁹ The AC(O) sought to establish some sort of machinery to exchange views in Washington between the British embassy, the State Department, and the U.S. Office of Policy Coordination. Perhaps somewhat optimistically, the AC(O) also requested full and up-to-date details of American anti-Communist programs.⁷⁰

In some ways, however, Britain’s pinprick approach was contingent on U.S. support. In March 1950, for example, the AC(O) acknowledged that the opportunities for clandestine economic activity and more general subversive activities were “largely influenced by the attitude of the Americans.”⁷¹ Likewise, the minutes of the AC(O) a few months later reveal that conversations with U.S. officials about policy in Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East were under way. These conversations were intended to decide whether “a more intensive assault” on Communism was to be launched or whether British efforts should be “relaxed.”⁷² The strong implication from the records is

66. “Future Policy towards Soviet Russia,” 17 January 1952. For more detail, see Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand*, pp. 323–334; and Aldrich, “British Intelligence,” pp. 331–351.

67. John Young, *Winston Churchill’s Last Campaign: Britain and the Cold War, 1951–55* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) p. 37; and “Ad Hoc Meeting on Preparation for US-UK Talks on Political Warfare,” 23 April 1952, in NARA, RG59, 1951–53, Executive Secretariat, Psychological Strategy Board Working File.

68. “Second Report to Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs,” 22 November 1949, in TNA, CAB 134/53, C(49)15(Third Revise).

69. “Draft Memorandum for Communication by HM Minister in Washington to the US Authorities Concerning Anglo-US Cooperation in Anti-Communist Activities,” 13 February 1950.

70. *Ibid.*

71. AC(O) Minutes, 31 March 1950.

72. AC(O) Minutes, 20 July 1950, in TNA, CAB, 134/4, AC(O)(50)22nd Meeting.

that senior British officials were awaiting either U.S. direction or U.S. approval of plans. By the end of 1950, Attlee was informed that all British covert action behind the Iron Curtain was to be carried out in full cooperation with the United States.⁷³

Assessment of the AC(O) and the Pinprick Strategy

An important caveat worth mentioning is that not all British covert action from this period has come to light. The released files point to a tentative conclusion that the pinprick strategy, with its limited objectives, made more strategic sense and enjoyed greater coherence than its short-lived liberation antecedent. Although the UK Chiefs of Staff continued to argue that British policy was too defensive, too timid, and too dispersed among a hodgepodge of committees, the advent of the AC(O)—despite certain flaws—proved a step in the right direction.⁷⁴ A tentative assessment is now feasible of the British approach in four key areas: interdepartmental coherence, strategic sense, integration with overt policies, and the containment of more dangerous and hawkish designs.

Ensuring Interdepartmental Coherence

The AC(O) provided a useful forum for the coordination and guidance of covert action. It brought together the key players from the Foreign Office, MI6, and the military, and its members were well aware of the boundaries of operations, including the bans on physical sabotage and any direct encouragement of resistance groups. Such a framework allowed covert operations to be stimulated and planned in a coherent manner and reduced the chances of launching risky ad hoc sabotage operations. The AC(O) also ensured coordination and scrutiny. Before 1950 too many proposals and operations were being considered in isolation and pursued by separate bodies, thereby wasting time and effort and creating poorly integrated policies.⁷⁵ Despite the formation of various mechanisms within the Foreign Office, British officials in 1949 reluctantly acknowledged that the government had not yet established coordina-

73. Brook to Attlee, 20 December 1950.

74. "Confidential Annex to C.O.S.(51)9th Meeting Held on Wednesday, 13th June, 1951," 9 June 1951, in TNA, DEFE 11/275.

75. "Revised Draft Report," 11 July 1949, in TNA, CAB 134/53, C(49)13(Revise); and Brook to Attlee, "Second Report of Committee on Communism, C(49)(16)," 16 December 1949, in TNA, PREM 8/1365.

tion and central direction of Cold War programs.⁷⁶ Regarding the fiasco in Albania, for example, officials conceded with hindsight that the operation was hampered by a lack of thorough planning and scrutiny.⁷⁷ The AC(O) was responsible for ensuring the necessary drive and coordination as well as for allowing political, economic, and psychological operations to be coordinated by a single organization.

As the number of proposals increased, however, officials realized that adequate scrutiny was beyond the capacity of the AC(O), which met only roughly every four weeks. Jebb realized that his colleagues lacked sufficient time to sift through all the evidence and examine the proposed schemes in adequate depth. Accordingly, some responsibility was delegated to another new body, the Overseas Planning Section. One of its tasks was to “ensure that no possible schemes for attacking Communism overseas went by default for want of proper examination.”⁷⁸ The Overseas Planning Section, which was closely linked to MI6 and the Foreign Office, sought to consider schemes proposed to it and welcomed advice on “pitfalls to be avoided” from missions overseas.⁷⁹

Strategic Sense

Through coordination and scrutiny, the pinprick approach made more strategic sense than liberation. Liberation strategies were fundamentally flawed and doomed to fail from the outset. The use of émigrés—so integral to liberation operations—was inherently unsound. Recent scholarship into the role of exile organizations in strategy has argued that although states have traditionally sought to use such groups as instruments of grand strategy, this task has often proved problematic. As the British were realizing in 1950, political exiles are instruments “of a special variety for they are instruments that are politically distinct from the state that is trying to use them. They possess their own political goals and their own respective strategic cultures. Because of this, states—especially great powers—often discover that their use as grand strategic instruments can become a very complicated affair.”⁸⁰

Britain encountered this problem firsthand in Albania. Although observ-

76. “Revised Draft Report,” 11 July 1949.

77. *Ibid.*; and “Committee on Communism: Report to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs,” July 1949, in TNA, CAB 134/53.

78. AC(O) Minutes, 26 May 1950.

79. “Planning Staff for Cold War Activities,” Attached: “Draft Letter to Heads of Missions,” 19 July 1950.

80. Brian Auten, “Political Diasporas and Exiles as Instruments of Statecraft,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (September 2008), p. 337.

ers have traditionally blamed the notorious spy Kim Philby for exposing the operation, recent scholarship has also pointed the finger at loose-lipped and often bickering Albanian émigrés, both in the refugee camps of Turkey, Italy, and Greece and within the Committee for Free Albania in Paris. This lesson was not lost on MI6. Senior intelligence officers lamented how the Albanian government had learned about the impending infiltration two months before the landings.⁸¹ When British officials were reviewing their approach to covert operations in 1950, they ruled out the use of émigrés in covert anti-Communist programs, describing them as “impracticable”—too risky, too provocative, and lacking in plausible deniability.⁸²

The liberation strategy was also doomed because political warfare alone was inadequate to roll back conventional Soviet military power from Eastern Europe. Neither the British nor the Americans were prepared to commit their own conventional forces to back up the resistance movements and secure the objective.⁸³ This strategic problem was raised by Arthur Tedder, the UK chief of the air staff, when discussing Operation Valuable in Albania. Although a strong advocate of covert action, Tedder expressed concern that such activity should not be considered in isolation and had to be gauged in the context of future overt warfare. Special operations needed to be followed up by direct military action in order to have real value.⁸⁴ Not doing so was a potentially serious, and even fatal, strategic flaw. Although (owing to the dangers of escalation and later the Soviet nuclear bomb) direct military action was never an option, Tedder’s point was officially recognized by the Foreign Office in January 1952. Senior diplomats acknowledged that liberation operations could not succeed without Western powers simultaneously neutralizing the Soviet armed forces by engaging either in armed intervention or in some diversionary action elsewhere. Such a strategy could have succeeded, if at all, only once the West had attained overwhelming military superiority over the Soviet Union in order to prevent escalation to major open warfare.⁸⁵

Britain’s covert planners had hoped that the internal security services of the East European states would not be as strong as those inside the Soviet Union itself. Learning from the failure in Albania, the members of the AC(O)

81. Jeffery, *MI6*, p. 716.

82. AC(O) Minutes, 15 February 1950.

83. Steve Long, “Strategic Disorder, the Office of Policy Coordination and the Inauguration of US Political Warfare against the Soviet Bloc, 1948–50,” *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2012), p. 462; and Corke, *US Covert Operations*, p. 6.

84. Russia Committee Minutes, 25 November 1948.

85. “Future Policy towards the Soviet Union: Annex B, Liberation of the Satellites,” 17 January 1952, in TNA, FO 371/25002, PUSC(15)16.

swiftly concluded that the security forces throughout the Soviet bloc were “infinitely more powerful than any previous organisation in history” and that the UK lacked experience in countering them.⁸⁶

The pinprick approach made more strategic sense. It was more cautious than earlier operations and was thus less likely to spark escalation and Soviet retaliation. This was in no small part because of the Foreign Office’s domination of covert operations and diplomats’ crafty ability to use the AC(O) to outmaneuver the military in pursuing Cold War policies. The committee was chaired by a senior diplomat, and Foreign Office officials outnumbered their Ministry of Defence counterparts. Moreover, the pinprick approach made more sense because it was reasonably cost-effective insofar as operations started off on a small scale and were only gradually expanded if successful. Finally, the approach was generally compatible with overt British foreign policy. For covert operations to be successful in both the short term and the long term, they must have a harmony of objectives with traditional diplomatic maneuvers.

Overt-Covert Alignment

Prior to 1950, Britain had a muddled approach to covert operations. Those responsible for generating proposals were forced to stumble blindly forward in the absence of clear policy guidance from top levels. Jebb and his colleagues had to trawl through a series of ministerial statements just to work out what the policy actually was. After rereading a host of transcripts ranging from Attlee’s broadcasts from Chequers to Stafford Cripps’s contributions to House of Commons debates, Jebb could deduce only what policy “appear[ed]” to be.⁸⁷ The only area in which explicit guidance existed was propaganda.⁸⁸

Accordingly, liberation operations became inconsistent with the broader foreign policy framework at the time. Since the Berlin Blockade of 1948–1949, Bevin’s priority had been to work with the United States in containing the Soviet Union. He referred to this as “holding the rim,” by which he meant preventing the Communist land masses of the Soviet Union and China from expanding any further than they already had.⁸⁹ How offensive liberation oper-

86. AC(O) Minutes, 15 February 1950.

87. “Ministerial Statements Regarding His Majesty’s Government’s Anti-Communist Policy,” 22 June 1949, in TNA, CAB 134/53, C(49)9.

88. “Committee on Communism: Report to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs,” July 1949.

89. Frank Roberts, “Ernest Bevin as Foreign Secretary,” in Ritchie Ovendale, ed., *The Foreign Policy of the British Labour Governments, 1945–1951* (Leicester, UK: Leicester University Press, 1984) pp. 30, 38.

ations fit into this broader, seemingly defensive strategy is unclear. With minimal policy guidance, both U.S. and British officials found their rhetoric disconnected from policy.⁹⁰

Initially, the advent of the AC(O) went some way to ensure that clandestine schemes were better integrated into broader anti-Communist policies. The committee, initially at least, was seemingly not limited to covert operations (although these took priority). Instead, it was able to take a somewhat more holistic approach by considering a range of measures, including, for example, encouragement of governments in the Middle East to take legislative and administrative action to combat Communism and the tightening of visas and travel restrictions of colonial students traveling to Prague.⁹¹

Action directed against East Germany as part of the pinprick scheme was consistent with Britain's broader foreign policy. British policy included efforts to strengthen the democratic institutions inside West Germany and to foster economic and cultural life that would ensure popular affinity with the West. This, officials hoped, would entice Czechoslovakia to follow suit.⁹² The onset of the Korean War in 1950 intensified this effort. Because Western politicians believed that the Soviet Union had instigated the war, they feared that the same thing might happen in Europe; specifically, that East Germany might try to unify Germany by force. The Western response was to promote the independent status of West Germany and allow it to accede to a plethora of international organizations. Regarding East Germany, Bevin, along with Konrad Adenauer and his French and U.S. colleagues, quickly resolved to ignore the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) and regard the Soviet Union as the real authority, imposing a diplomatic blockade against East Germany in late 1949.⁹³

Meanwhile, covert action was employed to chip away at Communist and Soviet control in the East by splitting the ranks of the SED, discrediting ministers, and spreading distrust between Soviet and East German authorities. To alleviate fears of an East German invasion of the Federal Republic, the AC(O) authorized covert efforts to undermine Soviet confidence about the loyalty and efficiency of the East German police. This action was specifically designed to "reduce the possibility of [the police] being used to attack the Western sectors of Berlin or the Federal Republic."⁹⁴ Similarly, in keeping with the

90. Long, "Strategic Disorder," p. 462.

91. "The Work of the Official Committee on Communism (Overseas)," 23 June 1951.

92. "British Policy towards Soviet Communism," 28 July 1949.

93. William Glenn Gray, *Germany's Cold War: The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany, 1949–69* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 13–16.

94. "Proposed Activity behind the Iron Curtain" (Third Revise), November 1950.

diplomatic blockade of East Germany, covert action primarily targeted the Soviet occupying forces, who were seen as the real authority. Action against the SED and East German police was often undertaken with the impact on the Soviet authorities firmly in mind.⁹⁵ The overt and covert strategies complemented each other and were again acknowledged in the 1952 policy discussions when the PUSC emphasized the importance of covert action used “*pari passu*” with an overt policy of negotiation from strength.⁹⁶ The well-defined pinprick approach therefore made sense and, unlike liberation, was properly managed, coordinated, and scrutinized.

Available archival records suggest, however, that this was short-lived. By the mid-1950s, the AC(O) was heavily criticized (and ultimately abolished) for being too limited to propaganda and covert operations, which, according to Norman Brook, encouraged a “compartmental view.” The committee tended to see covert action as a thing in itself rather than a “servant” of policy and to overstate what could be achieved through covert means. Officials worried that the covert tail was wagging the overt dog.⁹⁷ Planners in the Foreign Office later concurred that the AC(O) was deemed “competent to concern itself only with covert aspects of policy and hence could not ensure that its covert and overt aspects were properly coordinated.”⁹⁸ Accordingly, they argued that covert subversive action needed to be better integrated into the political departments of the Foreign Office and missions abroad.⁹⁹

Unfortunately, the bulk of the AC(O) files beyond 1950 remain classified. Two tentative conclusions about the 1950s can be drawn, however. First, covert operations apparently became increasingly disconnected from policy as the 1950s progressed. This may be because the AC(O) met less frequently as the decade advanced and because it lacked any ministerial direction after Attlee was voted out in 1951. The AC(M), created by Attlee to oversee covert operations at the ministerial level, did not meet at all under the Conservative government. Churchill and his successor, Anthony Eden (who, like Churchill, was a keen supporter of such activity), evidently preferred an informal approach to covert operations and opted not to use committee structures.

Second, a covert strategy seems to have fallen by the wayside and been replaced by ad hoc and opportunistic operations. Eden issued a prime ministerial directive in the autumn of 1955 reasserting a British covert operations

95. *Ibid.*; and AC(O) Minutes, 1 March 1950.

96. “Future Policy towards Soviet Russia,” 17 January 1952.

97. Brook to Eden, 21 October 1955, in TNA, PREM 11/1582.

98. “Overseas Planning Committee and Political Intelligence Group,” January 1958, in TNA, FO 371/135610, SC(58)6.

99. *Ibid.*

strategy. He stressed that “counter-subversion is an instrument of policy, not an end in itself. It is usually subsidiary to the main, overt, means by which policy is pursued.” Owing to the various constraints, such as fear of provocation and escalation, the prime minister switched the focus of covert operations away from Eastern Europe. He argued that “we should not attempt any major campaign of counter-subversion action against Communist-occupied countries.” Instead, the highest priority became the Middle East and South-east Asia, where such activity was to be increased.¹⁰⁰

Ultimately, the AC(O) was disbanded in February 1956.¹⁰¹ Its horizontal representations of decision-making were replaced with what was described as a more “vertical” approach whereby responsibility for covert operations abroad was transferred to the Foreign Office (which oversaw MI6).¹⁰² *Verticalization*, or the move toward reliance on traditional departmental structures, was intended to integrate covert policies better into the traditional framework of overt policymaking and to enhance ministerial responsibility and authority. The new structure also sought to strengthen the Foreign Office’s hand against its rivals in the Chiefs of Staff.

Containing the Military

The AC(O) played a useful function in containing the belligerent military. A key, if cynical, function of the committee was to serve as a forum in which the Chiefs of Staff could air their views and be made to feel as though they were having input.¹⁰³ As Norman Brook later bluntly put it, the military chiefs continued to engage in pointless “sniping.” Brook felt they still saw “covert activities in isolation from policy,” overestimated the potential for covert activity, and even showed signs that they would like to control MI6.¹⁰⁴ Their views had to be contained by the cabinet office, including through the AC(O). The committee scrutinized and discussed various proposals and was careful to ensure that only the more cautious ones with a reasonable chance of success were sent up to the prime minister and his most senior colleagues for approval. The far more aggressive proposals were weeded out at committee stage even though the proposals had been endorsed by the Chiefs of Staff.

100. Anthony Eden, “Counter-Subversion,” 10 December 1955, in TNA, PREM 11/1582.

101. G. F. Young to Norman Brook, “AC(O) and AC(M),” 21 January 1955, in TNA, CAB 21/5003; G. Campbell to Norman Brook, 15 February 1955, in TNA, CAB 21/5003; Norman Brook, “Note for Record,” 28 February 1955, in TNA, CAB 21/5003; and Patrick Dean to Harold Parker (PUS MoD), 9 March 1956, in TNA, CAB 21/2992.

102. Brook to Eden, 21 October 1955.

103. Ibid.

104. Brook, “Counter-Subversion,” n.d. (November/December 1955), in TNA, PREM 11/1582.

This pattern increasingly frustrated the military, and by the middle of the decade senior figures expressed exasperation at AC(O) caution and Foreign Office intransigence. They sought to “get cracking” with special operations and grew increasingly frustrated by what they perceived as slow progress. By contrast, John Ward, the Foreign Office chairman of the AC(O) in the mid-1950s, preferred a “more cautious approach” and was “irritated” at the military’s gung-ho back-seat driving. Ward, and by extension the AC(O), was forced to act “as a brake rather than accelerator on the Committee machine.”¹⁰⁵ The diplomats and the military continued to battle over the ownership of Cold War policy.¹⁰⁶

Conclusions

Conceptualized as the pinprick approach, Britain’s pursuit of covert operations evolved in late 1950 and 1951. Under the guidance of the newly created Official Committee on Communism (Overseas), key features of the approach included numerous operations of limited scope and with limited objectives designed to chip away at Soviet power in the East European states by exploiting weaknesses and sowing the seeds of disaffection. The strategy was cautious, involving experiments and pilot schemes in political, economic, and psychological warfare—but not sabotage.

Although the new approach was less ambitious than the earlier liberation operations, there was some continuity of covert activity throughout the Attlee years. Coordination with the United States, for example, was a constant, as was the importance of propaganda. Similarly, the British proclivity for pilot schemes was integral to the pinprick approach but can also be seen in the failed operation in Albania. The grandiose objectives of Operation Valuable in Albania were to be attained gradually and incrementally, by testing the waters and advancing if conditions seemed propitious.¹⁰⁷

Although Whitehall’s inherent caution frustrated U.S. officials, this was a more coherent approach than the liberation schemes. Reacting to the failures in Albania, the AC(O) attempted to provide a coherent framework for proposals to undertake covert actions behind the Iron Curtain and beyond. Moreover, the bringing together of officials from relevant departments improved the levels of scrutiny afforded to proposals for such action. The

105. G. Young to Brook, “AC(O) and AC(M),” 31 January 1955, in TNA, CAB 21/5003.

106. The creation of the Joint Action Committee in 1964 served a similar purpose: to coordinate covert action while tempering more aggressive proposals. See Cormac, “Coordinating Covert Action,” pp. 692–717.

107. “Policy Towards Albania,” 21 March 1949, in TNA, FO 800/437.

AC(O) did, however, create a Whitehall debate that lasted throughout the Cold War—and indeed remains relevant today.¹⁰⁸ Should mechanisms for the stimulation and coordination of covert activity be horizontal or vertical? The AC(O) represented a horizontal approach whereby representatives from the relevant departments came together to discuss and scrutinize proposals. The committee was initially successful and oversaw the launch of a coherent wave of covert activity behind the Iron Curtain in late 1950 which seemingly complemented British overt policymaking. Moreover, the AC(O) worked well in containing the military's demands for a more aggressive approach. Ultimately, however, an interdepartmental Cabinet Office mechanism was always going to be divorced to some extent from traditional foreign policy processes. As this was becoming increasingly apparent, military sniping escalated, and the committee was deadlocked by the middle of the 1950s.

Although verticalization allowed for greater integration with traditional departmental processes within the Foreign Office, abolishing the AC(O) reduced scrutiny and eroded a check against covert action. An interdepartmental committee ensured that other interested officials could scrutinize proposals and examine potential implications and blowback. Vertical channels reduced opportunities to challenge departmental assumptions and biases before action was approved by the foreign secretary or prime minister. It is therefore not surprising that the mid-1950s is remembered as a time of unregulated British covert action—an era of robber barons within MI6.¹⁰⁹ The balance between policy coherence and adequate scrutiny is difficult to achieve.

This has been only a preliminary assessment of the workings of the AC(O). Much more research can and will be done as more of the committee's files are declassified in coming years. Even the fragmentary files now available, however, yield remarkable insights into the British approach to covert operations in 1950 and 1951. After the muddled thinking from 1946, including the disaster in Albania, Whitehall began to develop a more coherent and considered approach. Covert operations did not decrease toward the end of Attlee's regime. Instead, the AC(O) helped develop a pinprick strategy that was tentative, incremental, and run by a committee—a very British approach to covert action.

108. Although the AC(O) was abolished and responsibility was transferred to departmental structures for overseas covert operations, a new committee was created in 1964 to pursue similar objectives to those of the AC(O). Known as the Joint Action Committee, it was in place until the end of the Cold War. See Cormac, "Coordinating Covert Action," pp. 692–717.

109. Dorril, *MI6*, p. 494; and Gordon Corera, *The Art of Betrayal: Life and Death in the British Secret Service* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011) p. 78.