

Confronting the Colonies: British Intelligence and Counterinsurgency

Rory Cormac. (Oxford University Press, 2014) 295 pp., index

Reviewed by Ryan Shaffer, PhD

Rory Cormac examines British intelligence responses to insurgencies after the Second World War and explores how strategic intelligence shaped British foreign, defense, and colonial policies. The study provides important insight into the Joint Intelligence Committee's (JIC) activities of assessing intelligence, making recommendations, and reforming local intelligence operations to meet shifting Cold War and postcolonial demands. Cormac draws from an impressive review of declassified reports and explains how the JIC climbed the Whitehall hierarchy and gained influence in counterinsurgency efforts.

Rather than focus broadly on a range of events, Cormac selects four case studies with insurgencies in Malaya, Cyprus, Aden, and the Dhofar region of Oman from 1948 to 1972. He describes the locales as representative of "a coherent analytical field for the study of the JIC and British counterinsurgency" and illustrative of the committee's evolving functions and managerial role of strategic intelligence. (11) The book contains analyses of JIC operations in the context of postwar challenges, but it also highlights how the "JIC product reflects two characteristics that are central to the British 'way' in intelligence: all-source assessment and consensus." (19)

Cormac begins his case studies with an exploration of the Malayan Emergency during the years 1948 to 1951. He examines these early years of the conflict because they shaped policies and marked new efforts in imperial management. Moving away from conventional war concerns of WW II, the JIC had to adapt to the Cold War and broaden its assessments. After initially failing to predict violence in Malaya, the JIC developed a warning capability, widened its focus, and collaborated with different departments. Cormac finds that the Malaya events marked "the beginnings of the need for coordinated intelligence assessment bringing together all relevant actors, to ensure that all sources were exploited and balanced against

competing interpretations, and that all implications were considered." (64)

The book then turns to Cyprus, with the Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston (National Organization of Cypriot Fighters) battling to unite the country with Greece from 1955 until 1959. Cormac argues that the conflict "changed the nature of the JIC forever and significantly impacted upon its ability to assess insurgencies." (69) The committee was concerned about conventional warfare from Cold War antagonists and linked Cyprus to the Suez Crisis via arms trafficking from Egypt. By the mid-1950s there was progress in the JIC's efforts against insurgencies and threats. The committee took on managerial functions by giving advice and guiding reform in local intelligence agencies. Cormac concludes that this era showed how "[t]he British intelligence model theoretically added value to local or tactical judgments by placing them in the broader strategic context." (101)

In the case of Aden and the Federation of South Arabia, the JIC became a Cabinet Office committee and had direct access to ranking policymakers. Compared to Cyprus, the local Adeni intelligence community lacked the ability to deal with the insurgency. Cormac explores the insurgency from 1962 to 1967. In contrast to Malaya and Cyprus, in Aden, "the JIC was more dismissive of the role of communism" and "preferred to propagate the idea that Nasser's fiery brand of pan-Arab nationalism was more influential." (133) The author argues that the committee underestimated ideology and local agency in the insurgency. Nevertheless, all-source intelligence helped interdepartmental covert action, which reduced potential negative outcomes from the covert intervention. During the conflict, the JIC gained "an increased confidence and status within the Whitehall hierarchy" but still lacked authority in foreign intelligence management. (151)

In the last case study, Cormac explores the Dhofar rebellion in Oman and examines counterinsurgency efforts from 1968 to 1975. Oman's close relationship to Britain, despite never becoming a British colony, demonstrates the shift in recent British efforts against insurgencies. Cormac argues 1968 was a significant year in British intelligence with several reforms that centralized all-source intelligence assessment and created "a more holistic approach to strategic intelligence." (161) The JIC was divided in two, with one section working on political and security intelligence, and the other analyzing economic and scientific intelligence. Cormac argues that the reforms "strengthened the committee" and illustrate the evolution of the JIC's focus from only counterinsurgencies to broader strategic issues. (191)

Confronting the Colonies offers readers an important understanding of the issues British intelligence faced as Britain lost imperial power and the Soviet Union sought to expand its sphere of influence. While scholars such as Richard Aldrich and Keith Jeffery have explored MI6's

activities during decolonization, this book provides a groundbreaking assessment of the JIC and its vital role in counterinsurgency. As Cormac notes in his conclusion, his study has contemporary relevance because the JIC still faces issues with weak states and insurgencies, and in the same parts of the world. In showing how the JIC expanded its focus and "found a role in countering insurgencies," he demonstrates why it continues to be a significant body. (221)

However, the book heavily examines the bureaucratic aspects of intelligence and the particular sites of insurgencies. It would have been interesting to learn more about the JIC's role in shaping counterinsurgency efforts with examples from actual covert operations or political reforms responding to insurgent demands. In addition, a comparative approach, using the Central Intelligence Agency, for example, would have accentuated Cormac's arguments that the case studies reflect a unique British approach.

