

U.S. Covert Operations and Cold War Strategy: Truman, Secret Warfare, and the CIA, 1945-53

Sarah-Jane Corke. (London: Routledge, 2008), 240 pp., notes, bibliography, and index.

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Histories that get the big things right should be read for the insights and lessons to be derived from them, no matter if they get smaller things wrong. This is especially true for intelligence histories, because writing them is especially difficult, given the particular challenges posed by the subject—namely, activities, events, and decisions that were conducted in secret and were intended to remain that way.

Sarah-Jane Corke, a Canadian historian of the Cold War who teaches at Dalhousie University in Halifax, has produced such a history of the origins of CIA's covert operations mission. One hopes that readers will be distracted neither by the relatively nugatory errors in fact or interpretation, or by the publisher's hefty price—\$160, but Amazon has it for only \$137 as of this writing—because her book makes points that are important for today's intelligence officers to know.

Dr. Corke claims to be from the “revisionist” school of Cold War historiography, which generally blames the United States for that conflict out of a premeditated disposition to confront the USSR in pursuit of American global hegemony and secure markets. But her main thesis is refreshingly (and realistically) at odds with that school. The development of covert action capabilities during Harry Truman's presidency and of the structures carrying them out was not something that happened by plan or direction on the part of US leadership but arose out of a set of messy circumstances. Essentially, Corke says, the failure of the Truman administration to develop a coherent Cold War operations policy for CIA allowed the covert action “cowboys” (my word, not hers, but it captures her argument) to implement covert operations that in the end were largely failures or were otherwise contrary to US interests.¹

It is no surprise to anyone knowledgeable about early CIA covert operations that, in the first years of the Cold War, most of this activity met with failure. We may never know how failed covert actions ultimately influenced foreign adversaries to modify their behavior, but even so, Corke is persuasive and, in my view, absolutely correct in demonstrating that covert operations under Truman's CIA

¹ In this context I use the terms “covert action” (a term of the 1970s) and “covert operations” (a 1950s term) synonymously.

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lacked coherence, a master plan, or even consistency. The primary cause of CIA's poor record in mounting operations during this period was, she says,

the persistent inability of the [Truman] administration as a whole to reconcile policy and operations successfully and to agree on a consistent course of action for waging the Cold War.... The United States simply did not have a coherent foreign policy during these years. Nor did it develop and maintain an integrated strategy on which covert operations could be based. (4)

I and other historians may disagree on whether the Truman administration had a recognizably coherent Cold War strategy. But that isn't really the point, which is that the hard thing was translating what the United States wanted—preventing any power from dominating Eurasia, supporting allies, and promoting international law and free trade—into what the United States should do about it in the shadowy zone between diplomacy and war. In other words, one doesn't need CIA's experience in Nicaragua during the 1980s to see that covert action, to be successful, needs a workable foreign policy context; it is evident from the first years of the Agency's existence. During the Truman years, the absence of a coherent plan to fit covert action seamlessly into overall US Cold War objectives meant that CIA was often left to its own devices and initiative with insufficient oversight by the executive branch. The Agency fell back on what Corke calls “the Donovan tradition,” which had survived the disestablishment of William Donovan's Office of Strategic Services in late 1945 and was carried forward into CIA's early covert action arm, the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC). As Corke describes this “Donovan tradition” (12–13), we can see features that arguably remain part of the organizational culture of the Agency's clandestine service to this day:

- Faith in individual initiative or “derring-do”
- Willingness to act unhesitatingly in ambiguous situations, to “do something” even if it goes beyond the original mandate
- Belief in the efficacy of unconventional methods
- Distrust or even disdain for the bureaucratic process and structure.²

Readers will also find useful her summary of the historiography of the Cold War, particularly regarding the origins of the term “rollback,” though, here again, for someone who describes herself as a “revisionist,” she argues against type that the United States was a most uncertain hegemon. She is excellent on the internal organizational and cultural divisions and feuds between the collectors of human intelligence, the Office of Special Operations (OSO) on the one hand, and the covert action operators, OPC, on the other.

A major point on which I and others will disagree with Corke is her repeated downplaying (pp. 8, 53, and elsewhere) of the external Soviet or international communist threat in the development of US Cold War policies, including CIA's covert activities. Corke apparently believes that the development of US covert

² CIA historian Thomas Ahern alludes to this legacy in his analysis of black entry operations into North Vietnam during the Indochina conflict. See *The Way We Do Things* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005) on http://www.foia.cia.gov/vietnam/5_THE_WAY_WE_DO_THINGS.pdf.

action was something that occurred with scant regard to the perceived Soviet threat. She asserts that “internal factors—ideology, partisan politics, personality and bureaucratic politics—took precedence over geopolitical considerations,” which is certainly at least a false choice, as these are hardly discrete factors. Much of the personality clashes and partisan debates of the Cold War from the very beginning, for example, were precisely about the nature and extent of the Soviet threat.

Another point of debate concerns whether it was clear in the summer of 1947, with the National Security Act already signed and the Central Intelligence Group on its way to being transformed into CIA, that the new agency would be conducting covert operations. Corke says it isn't clear (45–47), but I and other intelligence historians would say it certainly was. CIG was involved in clandestine operations, mostly HUMINT but also including what we would call covert action, and the National Security Act's primary act with regard to intelligence was to re-create CIG with all its activities as CIA. Moreover, the contemporary correspondence of DCIs Souers and Vandenberg, taken together with Truman's intent in creating CIG, make the case that CIA was intended from the get-go to conduct covert action. I also disagree that OPC—the covert action organization supposedly managed jointly by State and CIA but which also took tasking from the Joint Chiefs of Staff—was ever as independent as she claims, but reasonable people can disagree on these matters.

In any case, there is no dispute that covert activities were firmly underway by late 1947 and early 1948, and Corke recounts the disputes among CIA, State, Defense, and the National Security Council over the kind and scope of operations to be conducted, as well as their initiation, coordination, and organization—a situation she accurately describes as a “bureaucratic fiasco.” Corke paints a picture of an astonishingly diverse landscape of positions in the US government at the time, from those who advocated what later would be termed “coexistence” to adherents of containment to those wanting a more aggressive policy (later “roll-back”). In that chaotic give-and-take, CIA could, and did, heed the calls to action that underpinned its early covert action programs. Corke quite boldly, and I believe persuasively, puts the lion's share of the blame for this strategic policy incoherence on George Kennan at the State Department. Truman's establishment of the Psychological Strategy Board in April 1951 was intended to rationalize US Cold War policy aims and CIA operations, but as Corke ably shows, the PSB could not overcome the bureaucratic rivalry among CIA, State, and Defense and instead reflected “the complete lack of unanimity that existed within the [Truman] administration over the meaning and interpretation of American Cold War policy” (134).

The resulting covert action failures included ethnic agent paramilitary penetrations by sea and by airdrop into communist countries. These operations led to the capture and probably the deaths of, on average, some three-quarters of the teams sent in—a total over many years and in many countries that numbered in the hundreds, not the “countless lives” of Corke's hyperbole. She does give a usefully detailed description of a series of operations against a particular country that I may not name here because the Agency, despite plenty of accurate scholarship on the matter, has not acknowledged the activity because of liaison con-

cerns, but her chapter 5 persuasively presents what cannot be described as anything but a disaster. More valuably, Corke shows that the lessons from this failure were not learned, with the result that this kind of failure was repeated over and over again in similar operations against different countries over the course of the next decade.

History is not a science in the sense that one can run the experiment again, and Corke therefore cannot prove where the logic of her argument leads—namely, to the conclusion that better coordination and strategy would have made for more successful covert operations. The fact is that there was significant policy input from both State and the Pentagon for CIA operations in the Far East in the early 1950s, most of which—particularly those directed against mainland China—were unsuccessful. All this suggests that CIA shares the blame for these failures with other parts of the government and that better coordination doesn't necessarily lead to better or more successful covert action.

There are some factual mistakes. CIA did in fact warn the State Department about the likelihood of riots in Bogota in 1948. OSO did not prepare intelligence estimates but conducted espionage and other operations; here Corke has confused "foreign intelligence" (HUMINT) with finished intelligence. It was news to me that after his stint as the country's first DCI (1946) Sidney Souers went to the Bureau of the Budget: in 1947 he became the executive secretary of the National Security Council, returning to private business after serving three more years in the Truman administration.

There are the careless mistakes. It's one thing to misspell the name of a War Department intelligence official that only intelligence historians will recognize ("Gromback" for Grombach), but it's another thing entirely to occasionally refer to "Allan" (instead of Allen) Dulles or Walter "Beddle" (instead of Bedell) Smith. Commas are strewn randomly throughout the book. The footnotes too could have benefited from a disciplined copy editor.

Still, this is a valuable contribution to the history of CIA's covert action mission, and it is hoped that Dr. Corke will follow up with another book on how the Eisenhower administration inherited, used, and arguably improved the capability for waging Cold War in the shadows, a subject she just introduces in the concluding chapters of her present work.

