

UK “Black” Productions: Forgeries, Fake Groups, and Propaganda, 1951-1975.

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Abstract

Recently declassified files reveal a sustained black propaganda campaign conducted by the United Kingdom at the height of the Cold War. This article examines around 350 operations in which the UK spread propaganda through forgeries and notional groups. Placing the campaign in its broader global history, the article demonstrates that UK black propaganda predominantly targeted Soviet activity in Africa and Asia as part of the post-colonial battle for influence. It argues not only that the UK engaged in more black propaganda than historians assume, but that this was often offensive and aggressive: seeking to disrupt, attack and sow chaos as much as simply to expose lies. Although much of the content was broadly accurate, the fake sources deliberately deceived audiences in order to encourage a reaction, incite violence, or incite racial tensions.

Introduction

¹ I am grateful to Stephen Dorril, Jamie Gaskarth, Paul McGarr and Lee Richards for reading earlier drafts of this article. I am also grateful to the five reviewers for their comments. Any errors are mine alone.

Received wisdom associates black propaganda with lies spread by the Soviet Union and its successors.² Historians generally understand British propaganda, and intelligence activity more broadly, as comparatively timid, restrained and procedural.³ Despite some critical scholarship about the ethics and methods of the West's broader "cultural Cold War",⁴ the United Kingdom responded to Soviet activity, so the orthodoxy has it, by exposing disinformation and countering it with true (if selectively edited) claims, either openly or unattributably through a range of trusted contacts.⁵ Only in times of crisis, such as the Suez debacle; ambitious covert actions, such as regime change in Iran; or irregular warfare, such as in Northern Ireland, did the UK resort to more deceitful activity.

New archival files challenge this view. In reality, British Cold War black propaganda, typically defined as "the purposeful manipulation of the perceptions of a target audience through the use of disinformation or deception",⁶ was more systemic, ambitious, and offensive

² Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (London: Profile, 2020).

³ See for example, Richard Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold War Secret Intelligence* (London: John Murray, 2002); Rory Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny: Spies Special Forces, and the Secret Pursuit of British Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Philip Davies, *Intelligence and Government in Britain and the United States: A Comparative Perspective, Vols 1 & 2* (Praeger, 2012); Michael Goodman, *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee: Vol. 1, From the Approach of the Second World War to the Suez Crisis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); Peter Hennessy, *The Secret State: Whitehall and the Cold War* (London: Allen Lane, 2002); Keith Jeffery, *The Secret History of MI6* (NY: Penguin Press, 2010); Calder Walton, *Empire of Secrets: British Intelligence, the Cold War and the Twilight of Empire* (London: HarperPress, 2013). Stephen Dorril's history of SIS is a slight exception in presenting intelligence as less restrained but still far from a rampaging elephant. Stephen Dorril, *MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000)

⁴ See the debate ignited by Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999). For a more British perspective, see the special issue of *Contemporary British History* on Britain and the cultural Cold War: Vol. 19, No. 2 (2005).

⁵ James Vaughan, "'Cloak Without Dagger': How the Information Research Department Fought Britain's Cold War in the Middle East, 1948–56", *Cold War History*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2004), p.59; Paul McGarr, "The Information Research Department, British Covert Propaganda, and the Sino-Indian War of 1962: Combating Communism and Courting Failure?", *The International History Review*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2019), p.133; Andrew Defty, *Britain, America and Anti-Communist Propaganda, 1945-1953*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).

⁶ Michael Turner, "An Appraisal of the Effects of Secret Propaganda", in Loch Johnson, ed. *Strategic Intelligence: Understanding the Hidden Side of Government, Vol III Covert Action*, (London: Praeger, 2007) p. 112.

than currently acknowledged. Intelligence and covert operations – even those deemed particularly sensitive like black propaganda – interacted with more “everyday” foreign policy. This is rarely discussed in a literature which instead focuses on crises and conflicts.⁷

This article draws on original files declassified in 2019 and 2020 to reveal, for the first time, a sizeable and sustained British program running worldwide for around twenty years from the mid-1950s. The files cover around 350 separate so-called “black production” operations, conducted by the Information Research Department (IRD), the Foreign (and later Commonwealth) Office department responsible for propaganda. Black productions used notional groups and forgeries to attack political opponents.

In revealing this program, this article makes three arguments. First, and most importantly, the UK engaged in more black propaganda than historians currently assume, including elaborate multipronged and mutually reinforcing operations. The UK went beyond merely exposing enemy disinformation, even though this is how officials justified much of their activity.⁸ In reality, the propaganda, which was sanctioned – and sometimes driven – by ministers from both governing political parties, was surprisingly offensive. It aimed to stir tensions, disrupt adversaries, sow chaos, and, in some cases, even incite violence. All IRD black productions were negative, but those which targeted nationalism, especially in Africa, involved a higher level of personal attack and aggression compared to those targeting communism. Demonstrating the interconnected spheres of the Cold War and the battle for post-colonial influence, much of the IRD campaign targeted the Kremlin in order to sustain British influence in Afro-Asia rather than to defeat the Soviets ideologically.

⁷ See for example, the official history of GCHQ in which there is a distinct lack of intelligence and everyday foreign policy. John Ferris, *Behind the Enigma: The Authorised History of GCHQ* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

⁸ anon. ‘The Future of IRD’, 9 October 1970, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), FCO 79/182.

In addition to advancing understandings of British history, this new evidence contributes to several overlapping waves of Cold War historiography. It highlights the importance of ideas in the conflict: how people thought shaped the direction of the Cold War. Misperception, disinformation and swirling fears interacted with changing material incentives and policy choices.⁹ The Cold War was a ‘propaganda conflict *par excellence*.’¹⁰ Moreover, it reinforces arguments about the importance of moving away from Cold War Europe and redirecting attention towards the global south.¹¹ The propaganda deliberately internationalized each target – and sometimes well beyond bipolar power politics. It drew on fake groups from, and sent material to, multiple countries. The IRD recognized that power was diffuse and distributed more widely than the two superpower blocs. The Cold War was a global struggle, and here UK operations were more offensive and aggressive compared to those in Europe.¹²

The second argument is that most of the claims made in the black productions were factually accurate, if selectively edited. Given that the source was false, however, the propaganda still intended to deceive its audience. The fake source is especially significant because, despite having broadly accurate content, the source – and the tone and emotion which stemmed from it – was designed to encourage a reaction. This was particularly the case when the source was a supposed liberation movement, leftist group, or religious organization. Here,

⁹ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 283. See also the discussion in Nina Tannenwald and William Wohlforth, eds., “The Role of Ideas and the End of the Cold War”, special issue of *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 7, No.2 (2005).

¹⁰ Tony Shaw, ‘Introduction: Britain and the Cultural Cold War’, *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2005) p.113.

¹¹ See Paul McGarr, “Fake News, Forgery, and Falsification: Western Responses to Soviet Disinformation in Cold War India”, *The International History Review*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2019), pp. 34-53. On intelligence, Cold War and British imperialism see Rory Cormac, *Confronting the Colonies: British Intelligence and Counterinsurgency*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2014); On the intersection more broadly see Odd Westad, *Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Time*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Matthew Connolly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹² For a discussion of the literature see Mark T. Berger, “The Real Cold War Was Hot: The Global Struggle for the Third World”, *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2008), pp. 112-126.

encouragement became explicit and aggressive, occasionally crossing the line into inciting violence or religious hatred. It was not simply the “facts” which inflamed audiences, but the source.

This argument helps to establish a more robust understanding of black propaganda and its relationship to disinformation (the two are often used interchangeably). Black, at least for the British, was not so much to do with the accuracy of the information disseminated as the creation of fake sources by which that material was communicated. That said, it did use lies – fake sources – to deceive the audience. Technically, therefore, it constitutes disinformation, but offers more nuance than much literature which focuses bluntly on deceit. Importantly, and advancing our understanding of self-legitimacy in a liberal democracy, fake sources did not simply add credibility to truths, as justified by defenders; rather the context shaped how audiences would interpret and respond to the factual content. This argument contributes to more recent debates about the supposed post-truth world by problematizing the simplistic idea that an age of reason has given way to a new age of emotion.¹³

Third, officials had a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of success, but struggled to measure and articulate impact. The IRD recognized that, counterintuitively, exposure of propaganda did not necessarily equate to failure and that success could be intangible and unpredictable. However, the IRD struggled to move beyond counting outputs – the number of operations and the amount of press coverage each received – rather than the outcomes of each operation. Even this was difficult though and, unfortunately for the IRD, their superiors were more interested in metrics than the intangible impact of influence operations and, by the 1970s and deep budget cuts, were less keen for such activity to be conducted outside of SIS. This argument contributes to recent debates about success of covert action in the Cold War, by

¹³ See Rid, *Active Measures*, conclusion. For discussion of post-truth politics, see Rhys Crilly, “International Relations in the Age of ‘Post-Truth’ Politics”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No.2 (2018), pp. 417-425.

broadening discussion beyond grander attempts at regime change and complicating the nature of success.¹⁴

To make these arguments, the article first introduces the department involved and offers a broad overview of activity levels and meta-narratives, placing them into the broader international historical context. It then analyzes five key themes in detail, examining the purpose and veracity of claims made and demonstrating that the propaganda was designed to disrupt, discredit and exploit rifts. It closes by assessing the impact of the black productions, including by examining reactions in target countries.

The Rise and Fall of IRD Black Productions

Created in 1948 to counter Soviet propaganda, the IRD expanded quickly to counter broader nationalist targets as well. It drew on “raw” material to prepare and distribute “non-attributable propaganda” to “targeted recipients.”¹⁵ In their early history of IRD, Lashmar and Oliver make brief reference to a “special department” which worked closely with the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) “placing specific stories that needed to get out”. It was, according to them, “one of the best kept secrets” about which only senior staff knew.¹⁶ This appears to be the IRD’s Special Operations Section, responsible for the activities revealed here.

¹⁴ It builds on the following by challenging the relationship between exposure and failure: Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in Secret Politics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Rory Cormac, and Richard J. Aldrich, “Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability”, *International Affairs*, Vol.94, No.3 (2018), pp. 477-494. It seeks to challenge more quantitative approaches by complicating the nature of success. For recent work using data sets see Dov Levin, “A Vote for Freedom? The Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions on Regime Type”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (2019), pp. 839-68; Lindsey O’Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America’s Secret Cold War*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Anon., “Information Research Department, Appendix A, Evolution of IRD”, 1970, TNA FCO 79/182. See also Defty, *Britain, America and Anti-Communist Propaganda*; Vaughan, *Unconquerable Minds*.

¹⁶ Paul Lashmar and Paul Oliver, *Britain’s Secret Propaganda War: Foreign Office and the Cold War, 1948-1977* (London: Sutton, 1999) pp.141, 67.

This small section specialized in “the preparation and dissemination by covert and deniable means, through special outlets, of material in support of policy.” This included news stories and feature articles disseminated through covertly controlled press agencies, as well as pamphlets, letters, booklets and posters purportedly written by notional or genuine bodies. The latter form the focus of this article. Much of this material was based on classified intelligence, mostly from (SIS) or Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), for which clearance was required. It aimed its “output at those targets throughout the world which are of particular importance to HMG.”¹⁷

The program of some 350 black propaganda operations pales compared to the 1500 projects conducted during the Second World War by the UK’s covert propaganda organization, the Political Warfare Executive.¹⁸ It also pales when compared to the sheer amount of Soviet black propaganda – and more outright content lies – conducted during the Cold War.¹⁹

The CIA’s largescale psychological warfare, in which black propaganda complemented a flood of unattributable news stories, dwarves IRD activity. Black propaganda consisted of only around 2% of CIA propaganda activity – but the overall number would have been huge compared to the UK.²⁰ Intriguingly, though, in 1960 the British offered to take the lead over the US in black propaganda, perhaps suggesting near parity in this specific aspect of information work at least where interests aligned (or at least that the British knew about). The British still had a lingering sense of superiority in the darker fields of covert action, but it is unclear if this offer was ever taken up.²¹ Indeed, Anglo-American cooperation on the most

¹⁷ Special Operations Section (SOS), “Summary Guide to Work and Output of IRD by Sections”, n.d., TNA, FCO 168/3730.

¹⁸ Lee Richards, *The Black Art: British Clandestine Psychological Warfare Against the Third Reich*, (London: Psywar.org, 2010).

¹⁹ Rid, *Active Measures*.

²⁰ Loch Johnson, *America’s Secret Power: The CIA in a Democratic Society*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) pp. 23-24

²¹ IRD, “United Kingdom Brief: Techniques of Covert Propaganda”, June 1960, TNA, FCO 168/19.

sensitive aspects of covert action failed to achieve the formal interdependence for which Prime Minister Harold Macmillan had hoped.²²

Despite being small compared to the US and Soviet Union, the 350 operations constitute a significant peacetime program worthy of study for two reasons. First, it is far more than historians currently realize. And this IRD activity was conducted *on top* of SIS black propaganda in places such as Egypt and Syria; *on top* of myriad other IRD activities including disseminating material unattributably and covertly running press organizations; and *on top* of black propaganda in Northern Ireland which was conducted by a different IRD team.²³ Each of the 350 or so operations was time consuming, difficult and deceitful. The IRD's private admission that it had "capacity for special political action in the Information field"²⁴ seems an understatement. Officials were surprisingly enthusiastic throughout: "we should not hesitate to draw a bow at a venture".²⁵

Second, it is significant because the UK has long denied using such methods. HH Tucker, long-time head of the IRD's Editorial Section, recalled after the department shut down that it "has been accused of all sorts of sinister methods, of waging black propaganda, of misleading people and so on, all of which - and I can speak of this as an insider - are false."²⁶ Similarly, Christopher Mayhew, an architect of the department, accused critics of failing to provide evidence of a single lie or fabrication, although to be fair to him the black propaganda

²² For discussion see Matthew Jones, "Anglo-American Relations After Suez, the Rise and Decline of the Working Group Experiment, and the French Challenge to NATO, 1957-59", *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 14, No.1 (2003), pp. 49-79.

²³ As a result, Northern Ireland is not included in this article. For discussion of propaganda activities in Northern Ireland see Rory Cormac, "The Information Research Department, Unattributable Propaganda and Northern Ireland: Promising Salvation but Ending in Failure?", *English Historical Review*, Vol. 131, No. 552, (2016), pp. 1074-1104.

²⁴ IRD, "Information Research Department (IRD)", attached to Reddaway to Johnson, "Information Inspection: Future of Information Research Department", 29 July 1970, TNA, FCO 79/182.

²⁵ IRD, "United Kingdom Brief: Techniques of Covert Propaganda", June 1960, TNA, FCO 168/19.

²⁶ "Harold Herbert Tucker, OBE, transcript of interview by J Hutson, April 19, 1996, British Diplomatic Oral History Project 11", Churchill College Archives.

analyzed here began after his tenure.²⁷ Perhaps taking their lead from such testimonies and the early batches of declassifications, scholars have played down accounts of black propaganda as “sensationalist”.²⁸ This article redresses this in a non-sensationalist manner.

The IRD ran a sustained black propaganda campaign between 1951 and 1975, peaking in 1966. Work started slowly, with three or four operations a year between 1951 and 1957. During these years, SIS rather than IRD seemingly conducted the bulk of activity, against targets such as Egypt and Syria, through its Special Political Action (SPA) section and SPA (Prop) unit dealing with black propaganda. IRD gained a substantial role towards the end of the decade, although confusion existed about division of responsibility with SIS despite the two working closely together.²⁹

The IRD’s remit for black productions increased in 1957 and its number of staff doubled, largely as a result of the broader expansion of IRD to counter threats outside of Europe.³⁰ Its output that year mostly targeted President Nasser of Egypt, complementing (or overlapping with) SIS activity, and, after a dip in activity the following year, the 1959 World Youth Festival in Vienna.

According to Hans Welser, an experienced director of the section, each operation required a “skill which is not very common”.³¹ It was a difficult and time-consuming task: forgeries required months of planning, outstanding intelligence, and a collection of letterheads

²⁷ Lashmar and Oliver, *Britain’s Secret Propaganda War*, p.176.

²⁸ Thomas Maguire criticises sensationalism of the IRD through arbitrary references to black propaganda made by journalists. Thomas Maguire, “British and American Intelligence and Anti-Communist Propaganda in Early Cold War Southeast Asia”, PhD Diss., University of Cambridge, Cambridge (2015), p.20. More recently, and guided by new releases, scholars have recognised that the IRD did undertake some black propaganda but tend to focus on grey regardless because it formed the bulk of IRD activity. See McGarr, “The Information Research Department”, p.133; Cormac, “The Information Research Department”.

²⁹ Directorate for Forward Plans, “Counter-Subversion Structure: Annex D – Interdepartmental Review Committee”, 27 July 1966, TNA DEFE 28/146. See also Lashmar and Oliver, *Britain’s Secret Propaganda War*, pp.140-1.

³⁰ Strang, ‘A Report on the Unavowable Information Services of Her Majesty’s Government Overseas’, 30 July 1963, TNA, CAB 301/399.

³¹ Welser, handwritten note, 11 February 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2386.

and signatures to copy, as well as the right types of envelopes, paper and even staples to make the forgeries as convincing as possible. Deciding where to post them from was also a careful consideration – and many of these locations remain classified. 1959 saw 15 separate projects (seven targeted the World Youth Festival with others exposing front organizations and exploiting divisions between communism and Islam).

At this point, the Soviets ramped up their own disinformation efforts. The KGB established its own unit, Department D, in 1959, and upgraded it to a larger organization known as Service A three years later. The US Senate, increasingly alarmed, held a hearing on Soviet bloc forgeries in 1961.³²

IRD black productions rose gradually, although fewer “targets of opportunity” rather than changes in policy, caused a dip in early 1964.³³ The second half of the year saw “considerable overall increase”.³⁴ Welser was impressed. As activity levels continued to rise, he called for more black output because “when they hit a target they do extremely well.”³⁵ It was no coincidence that the Soviets targeted the global south at around the same time, trying to emulate the US in being a global power.³⁶

British propaganda rose in response but was also proactive and self-sustaining in its own right in the post-imperial world compared to operations in Europe. The UK had been using propaganda to counter nationalism here before these areas received a great deal of Soviet attention. At around this time, for example, the British noticed a rise in Soviet disinformation in India, ruefully commenting that such activity evidenced “a rather I.R.D. character.”³⁷ The British had been doing this for years.

³² Rid, *Active Measures*, pp.145, 147.

³³ IRD, “Special Editorial Unit Report – January – June 1964”, TNA FCO 168/1402.

³⁴ IRD, “Special Editorial Unit Report: June – December 1964”, TNA FCO 168/1993.

³⁵ Welser, handwritten note, 11 February 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2386.

³⁶ Svetlana Savranskaya and William Taubman, “Soviet Foreign Policy, 1962-1975”, in Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. II Crises and Détente* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 151.

³⁷ McGarr, “Fake News”, p.43.

The most common target, by a long way, was Sino-Soviet friction and Soviet front organizations, but the IRD also targeted Egypt, Indonesia, and communism in Africa – determined to disrupt the Soviet policy of “collecting allies in the third world.” These targets were not mutually exclusive: the Sino-Soviet schism reflected the struggle for leadership of the communist bloc, with the global south being its main goal.³⁸

IRD operations peaked in 1966. This was because of Rhodesia’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence which IRD targeted with 20 products in the first half of the year alone. From then on black productions gradually declined. There were comparatively few operations from 1969. This was largely because of cost: black productions were particularly expensive, time consuming and, as we shall see, struggled to generate quantifiable impact. The 1969 Duncan report on the “United Kingdom’s Overseas Representation” sought to reform Britain’s diplomatic establishment, including information work, in response to national decline and the post-imperial landscape. Faced with severe budget cuts, the IRD was hit hard in the early 1970s.

Interestingly though other IRD activity, such as using covertly controlled media organizations, increased just as black productions declined. The IRD distributed some 650 articles through controlled and independent outlets in the year from October 1973, up by 100 on the year before.³⁹ Again, this demonstrates the comparative expense of black productions rather than Cold War détente. It might also be explained by an increase of resources to Northern Ireland.

IRD black productions seem to have ebbed and flowed in relation to opportunity. It was modulated by international activity: increasing around summits, conference and front festivals, and alongside Soviet activity. At the same time, though, cost was a large factor driving the rise

³⁸ Savranskaya and Taubman, “Soviet Foreign Policy, 1962-1975”, p.141, 147.

³⁹ IRD, ‘SEU Annual Report: October 1973 – September 1974’, TNA, FCO 168/5510; IRD, ‘SEU Annual Report: October 1972 – September 1973’, TNA, FCO 168/5351.

and fall of black propaganda. Cuts hit the IRD hard, pushing officials towards less time-consuming forms of propaganda. KGB disinformation operations peaked in 1979,⁴⁰ by which time IRD had closed down and its black propaganda function transferred to SIS.

Narratives and Targets

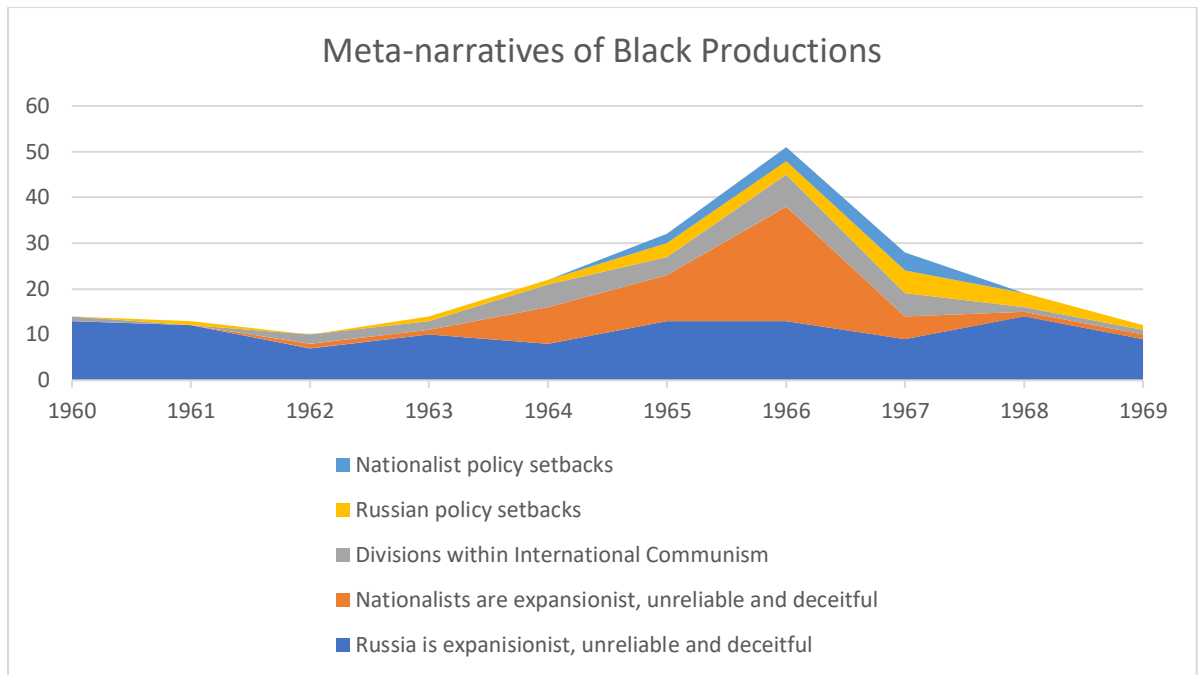
Having briefly outlined the rise and fall of black productions, this article now analyses the material itself. It demonstrates that such propaganda was decidedly international and designed to disrupt, divide and discredit as much as to expose. It was broadly accurate but deliberately deceived audiences.

Most black productions fell into one of five meta-narratives listed in figure one below: the majority attacked both Russia and nationalists for being expansionist, unreliable and deceitful. Other themes included exploiting divisions within international communism and, last of all, exposing adversaries' setbacks. Most of these themes stayed fairly constant throughout the 1960s, although attacks on nationalists dramatically increased in the middle of the decade.

Figure 1: Meta-narratives of Black Productions, 1960-1969⁴¹

⁴⁰ Rid, *Active Measures*, p.245.

⁴¹ This includes only operations for which the propaganda content is available to analyse.



The chart is crude, not least because certain operations addressed multiple themes, but it illustrates two things: first, the propaganda was entirely negative. The IRD did not use black productions to promote British policies or ideas, but rather to attack, expose and exploit. More positive messages resided in white and grey material. Second, operations most consistently targeted Soviet ambition, influence and mendacity. Interestingly however, they attacked such activity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, showing the interconnection between Cold War and post-colonialism, and the importance of understanding power diffusion and propaganda beyond Europe. Attacking what the IRD saw as Soviet deceit and expansionism in the global south featured much more prominently than exposing perceived Soviet setbacks.

i) *Exposing Soviet expansionism, unreliability and deceit*

The IRD's most consistent target was international front organizations which feigned neutrality yet actively pursued propaganda to promote Soviet policies.⁴² British propaganda, peaking in 1959-60 and again in the second half of the 1960s, aimed not only to expose these organizations as tools of Soviet foreign policy but to disrupt their activity. The UK delivered its message through a roughly even split between forgeries supposedly written by the fronts themselves and entirely fake groups, usually notional thinktanks investigating Soviet front activity. Forgeries were aggressive in seeking to divide and disrupt; by contrast the notional groups were more about exposing and discrediting.

The IRD created an entirely fictitious thinktank: The International Committee for the Investigation of Communist Front Organisations. With offices supposedly in Vienna, Munich, Stockholm, Brussels, Rome, Paris, Cairo and Dakar, it quickly became the most frequently used of the notional groups. Between October 1959 and June 1968, it purportedly issued at least twenty bulletins – numbered non-consecutively so as to confuse the Soviets. The IRD posted between 500 and 1000 copies of each to peace organizations, student groups, universities and the media worldwide. The “Committee” took a wide aim, using a combination of open and secret information to expose and discredit front activity ranging from the International Organisation of Journalists to the All-African Trades Union Federation and the International Union of Students. The overarching message was simple: these groups were tools of Moscow.

For example, in June 1966 the IRD used the notional committee to target a World Peace Council meeting due to be held in neutral Geneva for the first time. The World Peace Council was the largest of the Soviet front groups and had already been banned from having headquarters in Paris and Vienna.⁴³ The IRD now emphasized the disadvantages to the Swiss

⁴² William Styles, ‘The World Federation of Scientific Workers, a Case Study of a Soviet Front Organisation: 1946-1964’, *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2018) p. 116.

⁴³ Rid, *Active Measures*, p.261.

government of allowing front activities by warning that the Soviets would use it as “a victory march” to gain credibility.⁴⁴ The Swiss subsequently banned front meetings, thereby providing an opportunity for the “Committee” to purportedly send a follow-up bulletin highlighting this “severe setback” for the WPC.⁴⁵ The IRD believed its operation had contributed at least in part to the ban.⁴⁶ In February 1967, another bulletin kept up the pressure on WPC, highlighting the confusion in its ranks as a result of “the constant public unmasking of its real nature, origins and objectives”.⁴⁷

The ninth World Youth Festival, due to be held in 1965, formed another prominent target of the notional committee. It also demonstrated how the IRD used multiple fake groups to create complementary messages designed to reinforce each other’s narratives whilst appealing to different audiences. World Youth Festivals purported to encourage free exchange of cultural and political views, yet in reality were discreetly sponsored by the Soviets and planned, using prepared lists of speakers, in such a way as to limit free debate.⁴⁸

In the build-up to the event, due to be held in Algeria, the “Committee” purportedly issued a bulletin to youth and student organizations worldwide to expose communist tactics at previous festivals.⁴⁹ After the event was cancelled because of a military coup in Algiers and its rescheduling in Accra collapsed because of the fall of Nkrumah, the “Committee” purportedly highlighted the reputational damage to such “Communist camouflage organisations” and gleefully pointed out the difficulties in holding such events outside of the Iron Curtain. All the

⁴⁴ IRD, “International Committee for the Investigation of Communist Front Organisations, Bulletin Number 45”, June 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2372.

⁴⁵ IRD, International Committee for the Investigation of Communist Front Organisations, Bulletin Number 50, August 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2372.

⁴⁶ Welser to Clive, untitled, 26 October 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2372.

⁴⁷ IRD, ‘Special Operations Section Report: January to June 1967’, TNA, FCO 168/2921.

⁴⁸ Pia Koivunen, “Overcoming Cold War Boundaries at the World Youth Festivals”, in Sari Autio-Saraso and Katalin Miklóssy, eds., *Reassessing Cold War Europe*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 180.

⁴⁹ IRD, “Special Editorial Unit Report: January – June 1965”, TNA, FCO 168/1994.

while it falsely insisted that its investigation was “entirely impartial”,⁵⁰ with copies posted worldwide from addresses in Munich, Frankfurt, Dusseldorf, Vienna and Rome.⁵¹

The Youth Festival finally took place in Sofia in June 1968. The IRD used the committee to highlight the “unprecedented lack of interest in the event.” Black propaganda criticized it as Soviet imperialism, and tacitly encouraged those attending, especially “ever growing European student extremism”, to rise up against manipulation.⁵²

At the same time, the IRD issued a more aggressive leaflet purporting to be from a fictitious student group, the Committee for European Syndicalist Action, to incite violence. “We say”, it railed, “that the time has come to answer violence with violence.” Local newspapers took it at face value and described the Committee for European Syndicalist Action as an “ultra-left” group carrying out “subversion on behalf of imperialist intelligence”. IRD were pleased that the communists thought the group was genuine.⁵³ The aim, complementing and moving beyond other propaganda targeting the youth festival, was to disrupt rather than merely expose. Students from the New Left did cause trouble at the festival, just as the IRD hoped, through spontaneous demonstrations and critical discussions on the state of socialism.⁵⁴ However, it is difficult to isolate the impact of IRD propaganda.

A simultaneous leaflet by a fictitious African group, The Freedom For Africa Movement (on which more below), provided a third line of attack. In emotive terms, it criticized Soviet imperialism and implored Africans to stay neutral and not attend: “BROTHERS, THE FILTHY HYPOCRISY OF THESE PEOPLE MUST BE EXPOSED!!!! THESE PEOPLE ONLY WISH TO USE US TO CONSOLIDATE THEIR POLICIES IN A

⁵⁰ IRD, “International Committee for the Investigation of Communist Front Organisations, Bulletin Number 43”, April 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2414.

⁵¹ IRD, Rayner to Welser, 21 February 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2414.

⁵² IRD, ‘Investigation Bulletin: IX Festival Sofia 1968’, June 1968, TNA, FCO 95/2170.

⁵³ IRD, “European Committee for Syndicalist Acton Leaflet”, n.d. 1968, TNA, FCO 95/2170.

⁵⁴ Koivunen, “Overcoming Cold War Boundaries at the World Youth Festivals”, pp.182-183.

FALSE SHOW OF UNITY!!!!!!”⁵⁵ The three documents demonstrate how the IRD launched a multipronged and self-reinforcing campaign; they dramatically tailored the presentation of the same broad message to reach different audiences. This highlights the comprehensive, coordinated, if slightly convoluted nature of the IRD program.

British black productions also sought to warn audiences about Soviet expansionism, subversion and deceit more broadly. Peaking in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this theme drew heavily on forgeries and particularly targeted the Middle East and Mediterranean.

The Novosti Press Agency, a large Russian news agency, had the dubious honor of being the IRD’s most frequently forged organization in this regard. Between 1965 and 1972, the IRD forged at least 11 Novosti bulletins designed not only to expose Soviet activity but to deteriorate relations between the Soviets and the target audience, particularly Middle Eastern countries.

The 1967 Arab Israeli war provided a useful opportunity to stir tensions between Moscow and the Arab world. There was already tension given that Soviet arms sales had encouraged Egyptian and Syrian belligerence towards Israel; Nasser then ignored Soviet calls for conciliation. The Kremlin felt manipulated.⁵⁶ The Soviets had then done nothing to prevent Israel from taking the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights.⁵⁷

The IRD issued a forged Novosti press release shortly after Egypt, Syria and Jordan’s devastating defeat. Amidst the usual lines criticizing western imperialism and imploring Arab-Soviet friendship, it legitimized the Soviet stance and criticized Nasser by claiming that Moscow had urged him not to initiate hostilities. This claim was accurate but presented misleadingly because the Soviets had been rather more relaxed about the prospect of war;⁵⁸

⁵⁵ IRD, “Loyal African Brothers leaflet no.683” June 1968, TNA, FCO 95/2170.

⁵⁶ Savranskaya and Taubman, “Soviet Foreign Policy, 1962-1975”, p.152.

⁵⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: The Deals, The Spies, The Lies, The Truth* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 204.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012) pp. 236-7.

and some even claim they agitated for it.⁵⁹ The forged bulletin also accused Arab countries of lying about US and British support for Israel in order to hide the “shame” of defeat, and criticized Nasser for “the complete wastage of so much expensive military equipment”.⁶⁰ Although the Soviets had publicly defended Nasser, privately they were furious at the amount of equipment captured or destroyed.⁶¹ The IRD sought to make the private public and create tension between the Soviets and Nasser.

In a multi-pronged attack, the IRD also forged a Muslim Brotherhood leaflet denouncing the forged Novosti press release. It accused the Soviets of encouraging the war, criticized the quality of Soviet military equipment, and, in an attempt to exploit divisions between communism and Islam, aggressively attacked the “filthy-tongued atheists” for blaming the defeat on “peasants who lived all their lives nursing reactionary Islamic superstitions.”⁶² Meanwhile, a notional League of Believers, also created by the IRD, similarly attacked the Russians as atheist and blamed the Arab defeat on atheist arms.⁶³

The row, manufactured and disseminated by the IRD, gained a great deal of press attention, including in the *Guardian* and *Washington Post*, as well as foreign language press in local countries. Some took it as genuine, others noted Moscow’s denials but still quoted the propaganda anyway asking the question: “forgery or faux-pas?”⁶⁴

Dividing Islam from international communism remained a common theme for black productions. In 1969, the IRD forged a bulletin supposedly written by the New China News Agency, the Chinese state-run press agency, and posted copies from Paris to liberation movements, universities and newspapers across the Middle East. It accused the Soviets of

⁵⁹ See, for example, Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, *Foxbats over Dimona: The Soviets’ Nuclear Gamble in the Six Day War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁶⁰ IRD, ‘SOS Productions, 1967’, n.d., TNA, FO 110/2367.

⁶¹ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II: The KGB and the World*, (London: Allen Lane, 2005) p.152

⁶² IRD, ‘SOS Productions, 1967’, n.d., TNA, FO 110/2367.

⁶³ IRD, “SOS Productions, 1967”, n.d., TNA, FO 110/2367.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

failing to support the Palestinian Liberation Organization despite promises to the contrary.⁶⁵ This was broadly true: although the KGB did have an agent inside Yasir Arafat's intelligence office, the Soviets had shown less interest in the PLO than in certain Palestinian factions and had kept them at arm's length.⁶⁶

At the end of 1972, shortly after Libya's Colonel Gaddafi launched an Association for the Promotion of Islam, the IRD returned to Novosti with a forged booklet on the "role of Islam in modern society". Based on genuine – but selectively edited – Soviet material, the IRD sought to demonstrate "how Islam and other religions are oppressed by the Soviet Union". The language was comparatively subtle but still aimed to "arouse the indignation" of Muslims, by pointing out state regulation of religious activity. The IRD posted nearly 500 copies to "all Moslem countries" and to "countries with large Moslem populations".⁶⁷ The propaganda again used a lie to make a broadly true point. The Soviets did seek to create a subservient religious hierarchy and Moscow did see the Muslim populations of Central Asia as "backwards people".⁶⁸

An insurgency in Oman created a further opportunity to arouse Muslim indignation. What had started out as a broadly nationalist uprising gradually became more communist towards the end of the 1960s. The British had withdrawn from the region and London worried about the Soviets moving in.⁶⁹ The IRD forged World Peace Council documents to expose Soviet support to the insurgents. This time the forgery embellished a genuine WPC statement but added three extra points: Soviet support for the guerrillas, Soviet subversive plans for the region more generally, and Soviet designs on local oil. For extra plausibility, the IRD

⁶⁵ IRD, "SOS 'Black' Productions, 1969", n.d., TNA, FCO 95/2171.

⁶⁶ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, pp. 249-50; Haslam, *Russia's Cold War*, p.231.

⁶⁷ IRD, "Special Editorial Unit's Output: April to September 1972", n.d., TNA, FCO 168/4808; IRD "Novosti Bulletin: Islam's Role in Modern Society", n.d., 1972, TNA, FCO 95/2174.

⁶⁸ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, pp. 370-371.

⁶⁹ Marc DeVore, 'The United Kingdom's Last Hot War of the Cold War: Oman, 1963-75', *Cold War History*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2011), p. 447.

incorporated it inside an otherwise authentic reproduction of the English language “Voice of the WPC” monthly roundup. The press reported it widely at face value.⁷⁰ Much of this was true: the Soviets did train selected guerrillas fighting in Oman from 1968 and, alongside Cuba, gradually became the rebellion’s principal purveyor of weaponry and training.⁷¹ Likewise, the KGB did keep in close contact with South Yemeni intelligence, which was also aiding the insurgency.⁷²

Six months later, the IRD followed up the operation with more forged WPC material: 500 copies of a glossy brochure reiterating the same message but with “further antagonist references designed to irritate an even wider range of Arab targets” alongside a discreet rebuke to doves among the guerrilla leadership.⁷³ This came shortly after the KGB and South Yemeni intelligence had signed a secret agreement to collaborate against the UK, US and Saudi Arabia. In reality, however, the area proved an “almost constant headache” for Moscow, and the broader expansionist subversion, of which the IRD covertly warned, was limited.⁷⁴

Soviet designs on Arab oil proved a common theme throughout the period. Alongside references to the Omani insurgency, the IRD forged warnings from the World Federation of Trades Unions.⁷⁵ Again demonstrating a multi-pronged approach in which forgeries worked alongside fictitious groups, the Centre d'Etudes Mirco-analytiques, another British notional research institute, sent 1500 copies of a report exposing Soviet oil policy to trade ministers, oil companies, and newspapers in oil producing countries worldwide.⁷⁶ The IRD clearly sought to spin a large web drawing on multiple sources and techniques to propagate the idea of Soviet expansionism in the region and to divide the Arab world from international Communism.

⁷⁰ IRD, “SEU Annual Report: October 1973 – September 1974”, n.d., TNA, FCO 168/5510.

⁷¹ DeVore, “The United Kingdom’s Last Hot War of the Cold War”, p. 444.

⁷² Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, p. 214.

⁷³ IRD, “SEU Annual Report: October 1973 – September 1974”, n.d., TNA, FCO 168/5510.

⁷⁴ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, pp. 214-216.

⁷⁵ IRD, “SOS Black Productions, 1968”, n.d., TNA, FCO 95/2170.

⁷⁶ IRD, “Microscope Special Edition: Why the Russians are After Oil”, n.d., 1971, TNA, FCO 95/2173.

Overall, this theme of propaganda was more proactive and aggressive than simply exposing Soviet misdeeds. It actively sought to divide, discredit and spread tension. Importantly, it was multipronged, using a range of reinforcing forgeries and fake groups, thereby demonstrating the effort and time expended by the British. Also striking is the internationalism and attempts to discredit Soviets in the eyes of others (whether Arabs, Muslims, students in Latin America etc.). Even when attacking the Soviets directly, the British still emphasized the global nature of the Cold War and the battle for influence outside of Europe.

ii) *Widening the Sino-Soviet Split and Disrupting Either Side's Advances into the Post-Imperial World*

This IRD program did not particularly target China in isolation. Relatively few examples are indexed in the files; they include an attempt to highlight China's poor treatment of Muslims and an attempt to discredit Chinese medial aid. And, as was often the case, these were designed to influence audiences in Africa and Asia.⁷⁷

The IRD did come under pressure from potential collaborators in India to target China with disinformation. The British were reluctant, though, given the fear that doing so might unmask IRD activities targeting India. If the locals found out about IRD forgeries in the sub-continent there would be a political storm. Interestingly, the Indians suspected one document supposedly by a Chinese front as being a forgery. The local MI5 officer instantly recognized as British handiwork. Following guidance from MI5 and IRD, he denied all knowledge and

⁷⁷ IRD, "Index of specimens of 'black operations' carried out by the SEU of the IRD, 1951 to 1971", n.d., TNA, FO 1110/2359.

disingenuously even offered assistance to provide Indian intelligence with assistance on determining its veracity.⁷⁸

The bulk of the effort instead focused on deteriorating Chinese relations with the Soviet Union from the start of the 1960s and their impact on the battle to influence the global south. Both sides had hoped to prevent the quarrel from creating a schism in the global communist movement and resorted to attacking each other by proxy including through large propaganda campaigns.⁷⁹ Indeed, it is important to remember that IRD propaganda was simply one more actor in a confusing international mêlée of truths, half-truths, and lies. The IRD's specific aim was to expose and widen the schism, thereby undermining both sides' attempts to dominate the post-imperial sphere. This explains the comparative neglect of attacking China in its own right: British policy recognized the growth of malign Chinese influence in Asia and Africa from the late 1950s and was more focused on the end goal of influence in the global south (as discussed further below).

Widening the schism became a key theme of all IRD activity in the 1960s,⁸⁰ in which black productions were no exception. At least 21 separate operations targeted the Sino-Soviet split between 1962 and 1970, with the peak coming around the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, by which time any final remnants of Sino-Soviet alliance had vanished.⁸¹ It should be noted that the US engaged in similar – and likely far more extensive – activity here. The CIA spread propaganda emanating from fake resistance groups supposedly based in southern China aiming to build on opposition to the Cultural Revolution.⁸² The UK was just one propaganda actor among many.

⁷⁸ McGarr, “Fake News”, p.43.

⁷⁹ Lorenz Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split Cold War in the Communist World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 65-66.

⁸⁰ Lashmar and Oliver, *Britain's Secret Propaganda War*, p. 138.

⁸¹ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, p. 70.

⁸² Victor Marchetti and John Marks, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*, 1974 in <https://radioatlanticodelsur.blogspot.com/2019/09/an-oriental-psyops-mystery-story-of.html?m=1>

The IRD was slow off the mark, perhaps as a consequence of SIS's initial reluctance to accept the reality of the split, and so the aim was simply to stir and expose what had become a taboo for Soviet foreign policy.⁸³ This propaganda had a deliberately global range, stoking Sino-Soviet tensions over Latin American student activity, nuclear weapons, the Yemeni civil war, and the contested Sino-Soviet border.⁸⁴ The IRD internationalized the schism.

The IRD forged material from both sides, usually bulletins from the New China News Agency and the Novosti press agency; UK black propaganda would respond directly to other pieces of UK black propaganda. For example, a series of three forged "counter-vituperative" Novosti circulars specifically responded to forged NCNA bulletins in advance of the 1965 Afro-Asian Conference due to be held in Algiers. The staged argument was designed to demonstrate the disruptive effect of the Sino-Soviet dispute on international conferences and, by allowing the issue to dominate the agenda, to frustrate delegates from non-aligned countries.⁸⁵ In the end, a coup against the Algerian leader, combined with rumbling disagreement over the Sino-Soviet split, prevented the conference from going ahead at all.

The IRD also forged international front material to stoke tensions. Between 1962 and 1964, three forged Chinese People's Committee for World Peace circulars criticized the Soviet Union, played up the importance of Stalin, and criticized the WPC.⁸⁶ In response, the International Institute of Peace, a Soviet front, condemned the purported Chinese attitude in *Pravda*. The British were delighted with the international press coverage, including an article in *Peace News* entitled "international proletarian mudslinging."⁸⁷

⁸³ See Dorril, *MI6*, p. 714.

⁸⁴ IRD, "Index of specimens of 'black operations' carried out by the SEU of the IRD, 1951 to 1971", n.d., TNA, FO 1110/2359.

⁸⁵ IRD, "Special Editorial Unit Report: January – June 1965", n.d., 1965, TNA, FCO 168/1994.

⁸⁶ IRD, "Index of specimens of 'black operations' carried out by the SEU of the IRD, 1951 to 1971", n.d., TNA, FO 1110/2359.

⁸⁷ IRD, "SEU Black Productions, 1964", n.d., TNA, FO 110/2364.

Shortly afterwards, the IRD forged a circular supposedly written by the International Institute for Peace on behalf of the WPC. It condemned the Chinese Cultural Revolution as “gravely disturbing” and “a danger of the first magnitude to peace.” Although the main thrust was true – Moscow did perceive China as a threat – the International Institute for Peace quickly denounced it as a forgery, but this did not stop it being reported in the African press.⁸⁸ Complementing this activity, the IRD’s notional International Committee for the Investigation of Communist Front Organisations published an exposé of how the Sino-Soviet dispute was disrupting international front organizations and could lead to new rival “camouflage” organizations.⁸⁹

Once again, the IRD’s approach involved forging material from press agencies and front organization on both sides of the Sino-Soviet split. Although time consuming and expensive, coordinated releases would then expose the split, stoke tensions further, and disrupt the activity of front organizations. Indeed, it was active and offensive: aiming to disrupt as much as expose. Interestingly, this theme was once again closely connected to the battle for influence in the post-imperial world, given that widening the schism would undermine Sino-Soviet competition for global leadership. British propaganda reflected the idea that the global Cold War was more than two competing superpowers. The UK recognized the diffusion of power and the importance of non-aligned countries in pushing back against communist advances – these countries just needed a discreet push themselves. The intended audience was therefore international, rather than Russia or China.

iii) The Battle for Post-Colonial Africa

⁸⁸ IRD, “IIP Statement on behalf of WCP”, December 1966, TNA, FO 1110/2366.

⁸⁹ IRD, “International Committee for the Investigation of Communist Front Organisations, Bulletin No 53”, December 1966, TNA, FO 1110/2366.

Africa became a key Cold War battlefield and a priority target for black productions. As its empire declined, the UK feared Soviet exploitation of the post-colonial space and, sure enough, Moscow envisaged a full-scale attempt to compete with the US for influence by the end of the 1950s.⁹⁰ The KGB waged a black propaganda campaign designed to increase suspicions of the US, using forgeries to “reveal” CIA plots against almost every country on the continent.⁹¹

IRD black productions targeted Africa more than any other region. The effort peaked in 1965 but remained high throughout the second half of the decade. Hotspots, in descending order of frequency, included: Ghana, Sudan, the Organisation of African Unity, Tanzania, Congo (where SIS seemingly took the lead as part of a broader covert action campaign),⁹² and Kenya. This was in spite of growing reluctance to interfere – even covertly – in areas not of strategic importance from the late 1960s.⁹³

This activity came from the very top of government. The IRD had to overcome stiff resistance from the Commonwealth Relations Office to launch covert action against commonwealth territories and relied on an intervention from the Conservative prime minister, Alec Douglas-Home, to step up activities against Ghana in particular.⁹⁴ In June 1964, he specifically tasked the IRD to target Ghana after assessing that its president, Kwame Nkrumah, was becoming increasingly pro-Soviet.⁹⁵ Just four months earlier, Nkrumah had been taken in by a Soviet forgery supposedly written by a disillusioned US military intelligence officer “revealing” CIA and SIS attacks on Ghana. He was so incensed that he wrote a personal letter

⁹⁰ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, pp. 66, 71-2.

⁹¹ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, p. 438.

⁹² See Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny*, pp. 150-1; Paddy Hayes, *Queen of Spies: Daphne Park, Britain's Cold War Spy Master* (London: Duckworth, 2015), p. 64.

⁹³ Harriet Aldrich, ‘Uganda, Southern Sudan and the Idi Amin Coup’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, (iFirst, 2020) DOI: 10.1080/03086534.2020.1765530

⁹⁴ IRD, “SOS Operations against Nkrumah’s Ghana”, n.d., TNA, FO 1110/2342. The Colonial Office had earlier blocked IRD operations attempting to portray Nkrumah as a communist, accusing the IRD bending the truth. See Walton, *Empire of Secrets*, p.226.

⁹⁵ IRD, “SOS Operations against Nkrumah’s Ghana”, n.d., TNA, FO 1110/2342.

of protest to the US president.⁹⁶ The Soviet accusations were slightly premature – but would soon become valid.

Later in the year, the new Labour foreign secretary, Patrick Gordon Walker, recommended that the foreign office maintain a “black propaganda potential and from time to time produce black material.” He specifically suggested stirring racial trouble between Africans and the Chinese.⁹⁷ Black production did not exist without ministerial knowledge and direction.

IRD black productions aimed to expose Soviet designs on the continent, in particular, the role of Soviet fronts, and to widen tension between African nationalists and a) the Soviet Union, b) Arab countries, and c) the Chinese. Once again it was an international approach, recognizing multiple players and diffuse power. In addition, propaganda attacked specific nationalists personally to a far greater extent than that targeting communism.

Attempts to isolate African nationalists sometimes incited racial tension. In early 1963, for example, African students in Bulgaria clashed violently with police after local authorities banned their attempts to establish an all-African students’ union. The IRD exploited the opportunity by forging a World Federation of Democratic Youth response. Amongst flowery platitudes about anti-racism and Soviet-African friendship, it defended the Bulgarians whilst denouncing the Africans as uncivilized, “primitive”, and morally weak. The aim was to “intensify indignation” amongst African students – and it proved successful. The forgery received press coverage across the continent, with many newspapers reacting violently. It led to at least one college directly protesting the WFDY.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, p.435.

⁹⁷ Glass, untitled minute, 30 December 1964, TNA, FCO 168/1992; Üre to Glass, untitled minute, 19 January 1965, TNA, FCO 168/1992.

⁹⁸ IRD, “WFDY letter and Declaration”, May 1963, TNA, FO 1110/2363.

Another WFDY forgery, ostensibly full of praise and solidarity, repeated the theme three years later, highlighting the “backwardness” and “political immaturity” of Africa.⁹⁹ Yet another forgery, this time a Novosti, later blamed poor results obtained at the Lumumba university in Moscow on the quality of the black students themselves. The IRD sent over 1000 copies to addresses across the developing world. Deliberately stirring racial tensions would, they hoped, deter would-be applicants and anger non-aligned leaders.¹⁰⁰

The IRD used fake groups as well. One, Black Power – Africa’s Heritage, sought to split the US and African black power movement by attacking Stokely Carmichael, one of its most prominent figures. Carmichael had already been targeted by the FBI and had moved to west Africa where he became increasingly socialist, pan-Africanist, and advocated restoring Nkrumah to power in Ghana. The IRD attacked him as an “unbidden prophet from America” and demanded that he return home.¹⁰¹

Exploiting racial tension was not dissimilar to Soviet objectives targeting the US where the KGB waged a campaign posing both as the Klu Klux Klan and as an African American organization agitating against the KKK. One pamphlet, purportedly from the latter, reported accurate American statistics and real cases of race crimes in order to turn African audiences against the US.¹⁰² By comparison, the UK propaganda was far smaller in scale and included fewer falsehoods mixed in with the accurate accounts of discrimination. Even so, the underlying principle was similar.

The IRD used a range of fake groups to attack nationalist leaders across the continent, but the fictitious Freedom for African Movement became its vehicle of choice. Also known as the Loyal African Brothers after the opening rallying cry of every leaflet, the Freedom for

⁹⁹ IRD, “WFDY Circular”, May 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2387.

¹⁰⁰ IRD, “Novosti Booklet – “Foreign Students benefit from Soviet education””, October 1972, TNA, FCO 95/2174.

¹⁰¹ IRD, “Enough is Enough (African Black Power)”, September 1970, TNA, FCO 168/4280.

¹⁰² Rid, *Active Measures*, p. 137.

African Movement was purportedly a neutral Francophone organization created in summer 1960 to advance opposition to both European colonialism and the more recent Soviet encroachment. Unsurprisingly however, the vast majority of its output accused the Soviets of neo-imperialism. The IRD drafted around 50 separate leaflets on behalf of the Movement between 1960 and 1969, although 10 or so were never actually sent. This material, written in French and English (occasionally featuring a mixture of the two) and printed in batches of around 300, was sent to leaders, youth organizations, and the media across the continent. Activity peaked in the middle of the decade.¹⁰³

The Freedom for Africa Movement specialized in attacking individual leaders – often using aggressive language – for being tools of international communism. The archives reveal numerous examples. A prominent Kenyan nationalist, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, became a target in October 1964. He had secretly told the Chinese that President Kenyatta should be overthrown,¹⁰⁴ enabling the “Movement” to attack him as a tool of the Chinese. The IRD then bolstered the attack using another fake group: The People’s Front of East Africa, by implication pro-Chinese activists. They violently proclaimed support of Oginga Odinga against the “bourgeois reactionary government.” Many local newspapers reported it as genuine. Kenyatta blamed the Chinese; the Chinese attacked it as a forgery; Oginga Odinga thought it was the CIA.¹⁰⁵ Meanwhile, and confusing matters further, Soviet forgeries also attacked Oginga Odinga. Moscow sought to expose his secret dealings with China and cause Kenya to break diplomatic relations with the Chinese.¹⁰⁶ In this, Soviet and UK propaganda was strangely aligned.

¹⁰³ IRD, “Index of specimens of “black operations” carried out by the SEU of the IRD, 1951 to 1971”, n.d., TNA, FO 1110/2359.

¹⁰⁴ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, p. 441.

¹⁰⁵ IRD, “People’s Front of East Africa” Leaflet”, September 1965, TNA, FCO 168/2386.

¹⁰⁶ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, p. 441.

Between 1965 and 1968, the Freedom for Africa Movement purportedly posted hundreds of copies of four leaflets attacking Diallo Telli, the secretary-general of the Organisation for African Unity. The first accused him of violating the organization's charter, becoming "delirious for power", and being biased towards the Chinese and the UAR. It closed with a rallying call: "DIALLO TELLI MUST BE REPLACED BY A PERSON WORTHY OF OUR TRUST".¹⁰⁷ Four months later, the second stepped up these accusations (alongside a swipe at the UK for credibility purposes), accusing Telli of being a self-serving tyrant "PLACING ALL OF AFRICA IN THE MOST GRAVE PERIL".¹⁰⁸

When that did not work, the IRD played the Soviet card: Telli "visited Moscow for SECRET NEGOTIATIONS with the leaders of the Soviet Union". He "received SECRET DIRECTIVES relative to MANIPULATING the OAU to serve the expansionist political exigencies" of the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁹ Once again, the IRD complemented these attacks with propaganda from another notional group, this time supposedly based in Accra.¹¹⁰ The attacks had little impact: Telli remained in place until 1972.

By 1969, the IRD wondered whether the Freedom For Africa Movement had outlived its usefulness. As nationalism and African unity declined in salience, the propaganda gained less traction. The IRD therefore created a new fake group: The Organisation of African Students for African Power. By implication, this was a more "up-to-date" group based in East Germany.¹¹¹ It espoused a radical New Left position "proclaiming a plague on both houses", which the IRD thought provided a better platform to "damage opponents" than the dated nationalist approach, whilst being difficult to trace back to Britain because many similar groups had genuinely sprung up in the late 1960s.¹¹² The new group attempted to link a wave of

¹⁰⁷ IRD, "Loyal African Brothers leaflet No. 657", September 1965, TNA, FCO 168/2386.

¹⁰⁸ IRD, "Loyal African Brothers leaflet No. 661", January 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2387.

¹⁰⁹ IRD, "Loyal African Brothers leaflet No. 676," August 1967, TNA, FO 1110/2367.

¹¹⁰ IRD, "Exposure of Diallo Telli", October 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2920.

¹¹¹ IRD, Rayner to [redacted], 24 March 1969, TNA, FCO 168/3900.

¹¹² IRD, [redacted] to Rayner, 22 May 1969, TNA, FCO 168/3900.

assassinations in Africa to the Soviets, but it is unclear how successful they were. The IRD only used them once.¹¹³ The choice of East Germany was instructive, once again demonstrating the international prism through which the UK viewed developments in places like Ghana and Kenya. Propaganda targeting African countries drew on relations between East Germany, Russia, China and the US.

Rhodesia's unilateral declaration of independence in November 1965 led to a dramatic spike in IRD black propaganda: at least 27 operations in less than a year. This formed part of a broader covert action campaign designed to "bring about the downfall of the Smith regime and a return to constitutional government and the rule of law in Rhodesia, with a view to the resumption of progress toward majority rule as quickly as possible." Covert operations, including black propaganda, distinguished between the rebel regime and the constitutional elements in Rhodesia and only targeted the white community. This time, they were expressly forbidden to "stimulate a racial conflict."¹¹⁴

Most of the IRD's black work came from two new fake groups designed to discredit and undermine the Smith regime. The first was called the Matopos Club, by implication an anti-Smith white Rhodesian group. The IRD prepared at least 15 leaflets in the name of the Matopos Club in the first half of 1966 alone. To maintain credibility, the Matopos Club railed against "those arrogant dictators in Whitehall", but attacked Smith for lying, creating "chaos", crippling the economy, and, ironically, spreading propaganda. "The whole world is against us", it preached. "We must call a halt while we can still save our country." The "Club" purportedly campaigned for pragmatic negotiations and, encouraging direct action, called on readers to

¹¹³ IRD, "Yet Another Murder Attempt", May 1969, TNA, FCO 168/3900.

¹¹⁴ Ian Beesley, *The Official History of the Cabinet Secretaries*, (Abingdon: Routledge 2018), p. 320.

write to their MPs. The IRD was impressed with the results and revived the series in November.¹¹⁵

Another fake white anti-Smith organization, this time unnamed, complemented the Matopos Club. Also created by the IRD, this group shared news stories censored in the Rhodesian press, under the heading “more of what we are not allowed to read”. The operation deliberately bolstered the Matopos line about Smith’s deceit and propaganda.¹¹⁶

The IRD considered more aggressive operations. One involved using a notional white supremacist “extreme” group to express support for Smith and encourage him to suppress liberal elements within his government. This would discredit him through association with a terrorist organization. The operation was cancelled.¹¹⁷ The IRD dropped a similar operation which intended to use a notional People’s Front of East Africa to incite violence against the Rhodesian regime.¹¹⁸ Both operations would have breached the cabinet secretary’s principle of not stimulating racial conflict. The rules of engagement differed when attacking Rhodesia; the UK was more comfortable stimulating conflict between Africans and the Soviets.

This close analysis of black propaganda targeting Africa demonstrates three things. First, it ties into the general aim of such activity more broadly: to disrupt and discredit. Second, and unlike propaganda targeting the communists, the British were more personal and aggressive in attacking nationalist leaders. Propagandists felt less inhibited when targeting post-imperial Africa, feeling fewer constraints compared to targeting the more powerful Soviets. They even deliberately incited racial tension between local populations and Moscow, although stopped short of doing something similar between locals and the Rhodesian government. Third, it demonstrates the internationalism at play: British activity targeting

¹¹⁵ IRD, Matopos Club leaflets, 1966, in TNA, FO 1110/2366; see also IRD, “Special Operations Section Report: January – June 1966”, TNA, FCO 168/2387.

¹¹⁶ See “More of What We are Allowed to Read’ leaflets”, 1966, TNA, FO 1110/2366.

¹¹⁷ IRD, ““Die Wit Hand” Leaflet”, 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2387.

¹¹⁸ IRD, ““People’s Front of East Africa” Leaflet”, 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2387.

countries from Ghana to Kenya drew on perceptions of China, Russia, East Germany, Bulgaria, Egypt and even the US. Interplay between Cold War and decolonization was crucial, but so too was the growing recognition of multiple actors of influence beyond two superpowers.

iv) *Egypt*

Egypt unsurprisingly formed a priority area for UK black productions; at least 23 separate IRD operations targeted the country. Most black productions came long after the Suez Crisis. Instead, 1964, 1966 and 1967 – crucial years in the Yemeni civil war – were particularly busy years for the department.

IRD activity targeting Egypt was similar to that targeting the Soviets: it used both fake groups and forgeries to expose Egyptian subversion, expansionism, and designs on oil to an international audience. Unlike anti-Soviet propaganda though, the IRD was much more prepared to target Nasser personally.¹¹⁹ His intervention in the Yemeni civil war, in which Egypt supported republican forces against royalists loyal to the deposed imam, formed the main target. Indeed, the UK turned to a range of covert operations to oppose the Egyptians throughout the war, ranging from black propaganda to funneling arms to friendly tribes.¹²⁰

In December 1962, a republican coup overthrew the Yemeni imam and ignited the civil war. As Egyptian forces flooded into the country, a notional Syrian group purportedly warned Yemenis living in Aden and South Arabia about the dangers of Egyptian domination by relaying their own supposed experiences of dealing with Nasser.¹²¹ 18 months later a fictitious Ba'athist organization, also purportedly from Syria, attacked Nasser's expansionist ambitions

¹¹⁹ See, IRD, 'Index of specimens of "black operations" carried out by the SEU of the IRD, 1951 to 1971', TNA, FO 1110/2359.

¹²⁰ See Clive Jones, *Britain and the Yemen Civil War 1962–1965: Ministers, Mercenaries and Mandarins: Foreign Policy and the Limits of Covert Action* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004).

¹²¹ IRD, "Arab Brothers (Aden)", December 1962, TNA, FO 1110/2362.

in Yemen. The IRD was behind both. Using familiar themes, they opposed imperialism, exposed the economic cost of Nasser's intervention, and sought to divide Egypt from other Arab countries, including through exploiting religious tensions. For example, the Ba'athists purportedly criticized Egyptian "secret agents, spies and troublemakers [who] lord it all over the place and chase the women, married or unmarried, violating Islamic traditions and Arab customs".¹²²

The IRD developed these themes at regular intervals throughout the civil war using a range of notional groups supposedly based in Egypt, Baghdad, Syria and East Germany.¹²³ As the war drew to a close in 1967, a final flurry of propaganda accused Nasser of unnecessarily prolonging the conflict and of wasting huge sums of money in doing so. The messages all complemented each other and reinforced familiar themes but targeted different audiences. Interestingly, the IRD only used each notional group once, but between them the campaign sent over 1000 leaflets across the region to newspapers, politicians, student groups, religious leaders, radio stations, and prominent officials. British intelligence assessed that Nasser had no great desire to be in Yemen but was "bound by his 'face' as leader of Arab revolution."¹²⁴ The propaganda campaign sought to attack and undermine that very face.

Meanwhile, the IRD forged material supposedly from the Muslim Brotherhood to complement the work of the fake groups. For example, a forged leaflet attacked Egypt for using chemical weapons in Yemen in an attempt to generate publicity against Nasser and put pressure on the ceasefire negotiations. The claims were factually accurate, but the tone and fake source deliberately misled the audience to incite violence. The IRD used aggressive religious language to provoke opposition to Nasser: "these crimes have not been committed by the atheists or the

¹²² IRD, "Brother Arabs", June 1964, TNA, FO 1110/2364.

¹²³ IRD, "Index of specimens of "black operations" carried out by the SEU of the IRD, 1951 to 1971", TNA, FO 1110/2359.

¹²⁴ Dina Rezk, *The Arab World and Western Intelligence: Analysing the Middle East, 1956-1981*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 14.

imperialists or the Zionist Jews, but by the Egyptians who are supposed to be believers. These Egyptian murderers have gone too far in their hypocrisy unpunished, but they can no longer pretend to be believers in God and in His Prophet and in His sacred book.” It continued, “if the Egyptians have to go to war and fight, why don’t they direct their armies against the Jews?” The IRD, posing as the Brotherhood, pointed out that Egyptian bombs used against Yemen would have been enough to “destroy Israel completely”. This criticism, the British deceitfully added, was “in the name of Islam”. The propaganda exposed Egyptian activity and smeared Nasser, but, in creating a credible forgery, the UK saw inciting hatred against Israel as worthwhile collateral.¹²⁵

Interestingly, the US was deliberately muted in exposing Egyptian use of chemical weapons. It did not want a confrontation over the issue, sought to avoid further commitments to Yemen, and was itself using defoliants in bombing Vietnam. Criticizing Egypt would have invited criticisms of the US.¹²⁶ Perhaps the UK propaganda therefore had an American dimension too: exposing the activity without drawing criticism from Washington.¹²⁷

This propaganda activity reinforces recent literature on the international nature of the Yemen civil war. It reconfirms UK involvement, but demonstrates that the British targeted Egypt by drawing on Israeli, Syrian, Iraqi and German angles. It highlights the role played by smaller powers, including the UK, beyond the so-called Arab Cold War. The British waded into an inter-Arab conflict between monarchies and republics over power and legitimacy; the battle for influence mixed a range of factors from Cold War competition to nationalism and

¹²⁵ IRD, “World Muslim Brotherhood (No. 5) Poison gas”, February 1967, TNA, FCO 168/2921.

¹²⁶ Asher Orkaby, *Beyond the Arab Cold War: The International History of the Yemen Civil War, 1962-68* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 132-134.

¹²⁷ There had long been Anglo-American tension over Yemen dating back to the aftermath of the 1962 coup, although the “special” relationship contained it reasonably well. See Tia Culley and Steve Marsh, “Anglo-American Relations and a Dilemma of Diplomatic Recognition: Royalists, Republicans and Crisis in the Yemen, 1962–1963”, *The International History Review*, Vol. 42, No.1 (2020), pp. 42-59.

local rivalries.¹²⁸ This was reflected in British propaganda which, ironically, reduces perceptions of British agency by highlighting the multiple internal and external actors.

In sum, this propaganda theme demonstrates much less inhibition compared to targeting the Soviets. Again, it was about drawing on the international context to discredit and disrupt Nasser rather than simply exposing him. Most dramatically, the British seemed to take more risks here in willingness to incite racial and religious tension as acceptable collateral for credibility.

v) *Indonesia*

Indonesia was a prominent adversary of the UK during this period. The so-called Confrontation, lasting from 1962 to 1966 and stemming from Indonesia's opposition to the creation of Malaysia, involved a wide range of British covert actions, from sabotage to political warfare.¹²⁹ Between September 1964 and President Sukarno's fall from power in 1967 the IRD launched 11 operations attacking him personally and stoking conflict between Indonesia and international Islam.

The most prominent line sought to discredit Sukarno in the eyes of Muslims. In May 1965, the IRD sent 160 copies of a forged leaflet, supposedly written by the chairman of the leading Indonesian Islamic political party, to newspapers and Islamic organizations across the Middle East. Aiming to expose Sukarno's desire to take over leadership of the Muslim world and to "antagonise Muslim leaders in the Middle East", it called upon Muslims to "rally under the banner of the new leader of Islam – Sukarno."¹³⁰

¹²⁸ See Orkaby, *Beyond the Arab Cold War*, pp.4-5; Jesse Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the 6 Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹²⁹ Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny*, p.174.

¹³⁰ IRD, "Abbas Muslim letter", May 1965, TNA, FCO 168/1994.

In the following weeks, the IRD followed up with two forged statements purportedly from the Muslim Brotherhood attacking Sukarno. The first, written “in the name of God the Merciful and Compassionate”, attacked the flamboyancy of his private life. Specifically, it accused him of trafficking up to 30 young women from Japanese corporations in return for trade deals. It stated that two women had attempted or committed suicide and that two more had “previously disappeared in similar circumstances.”¹³¹

The second forgery built on the first: his “extravagance in pleasures” brought “great shame” on Muslims worldwide. It questioned his relationship with a “prostitute” who ate “pig’s meat”, “only pretended that she had converted to Islam”, “coats her lips with paint”, and whose portrait supposedly hung above the bed of one of Sukarno’s four wives. His behavior was “a great insult to the whole Islamic world”.¹³²

Aside from whether claims about trafficking Japanese women were true, the broader suggestion that Sukarno was teeing himself up as leader of the Muslim world seems deceitful. Sukarno was not particularly trying to achieve such leadership; in fact, Islam was notable by its absence from Indonesian foreign policy and Sukarno grew increasingly suspicious of relationships between Indonesian and Muslim actors.¹³³ Indonesian Muslims had become increasingly marginalized from political and economic life under the final years of his regime.¹³⁴

Either way, the propaganda sought to exploit real rifts and suspicions between Indonesia and the Middle East to undermine Sukarno’s attempt to challenge the global order. Many Arab countries did not support Sukarno’s confrontation with Malaysia, or indeed his

¹³¹ IRD, “Muslim Brotherhood No. 1 (anti-Sukarno)”, June 1965, TNA, FCO 168/1994 (the full forgery is in FO 1110/2345).

¹³² IRD, “Muslim Brotherhood No. 2 (anti-Sukarno)”, July 1965, TNA, FCO 168/2386.

¹³³ Rizal Sukma, *Islam in Indonesian Foreign Policy: Domestic Weakness and the Dilemma of Dual Identity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004) p. 34; Delphine Alles, *Transnational Islamic Actors and Indonesia’s Foreign Policy: Transcending the State* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p.42.

¹³⁴ Robert Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 58.

radical foreign policy more generally, much to Sukarno's frustration.¹³⁵ In return, Sukarno countered unwanted external influences on Indonesia by Saudi Arabia.¹³⁶

That same summer, the Soviets targeted Indonesia with disinformation of their own. Czechoslovakian intelligence forged a letter, supposedly from the British ambassador in Jakarta to the Foreign Office, outlining a fake US-UK plan to invade Indonesia from bases in Malaysia.¹³⁷ Likewise, the Soviets held their own material on Sukarno's renowned sexual escapades with which they planned to discredit or blackmail him.¹³⁸ Meanwhile, the Chinese grew increasingly concerned about Sukarno's "bourgeois" regime and feared he was trying to use Beijing to create his own regional hegemony.¹³⁹ UK activity did not exist in a vacuum.

A failed military putsch at the end of September 1965 allowed the IRD to add another line of attack. The British, alongside Australia and the US,¹⁴⁰ fanned and exploited rumors that Indonesian communists were behind the attempted coup. A wave of propaganda sought to "blacken" the local communist party "in the eyes of the army and the people of Indonesia". This, as the Foreign Office later modestly assessed, "marginally contributed" to the military's subsequent purge of communism in which 500,000 people died.¹⁴¹ Much activity was conducted locally from the regional office in Singapore, but, from London, the IRD forged Chinese material defending the local communists and attacking the Indonesian generals. The aim was to encourage further purges by providing the generals with ammunition against the Chinese.¹⁴² At the same time, the IRD tried to associate Sukarno with the communists by

¹³⁵ Sukma, *Islam in Indonesian Foreign Policy*, p. 34.

¹³⁶ Alles, *Transnational Islamic Actors and Indonesia's Foreign Policy*, p. 49.

¹³⁷ Ladislav Bittmann, *The Deception Game*, (NY: Ballantine, 1981) p. 117.

¹³⁸ Evan Thomas, *The Very Best Men: The Daring Early Years of the CIA*, (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2012 edn), pp. 158-9.

¹³⁹ Westad, *Global Cold War*, p. 185.

¹⁴⁰ See Adam Hughes Henry, 'Polluting the Waters: A Brief History of Anti-Communist Propaganda During the Indonesian Massacres', *Genocide Studies International*, Vol.8, No.2 (2014), pp. 153-175.

¹⁴¹ Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny*, p.174.

¹⁴² IRD, "NCNA Handout," November 1965, TNA, FCO 168/2386.

distributing pictures of him pinning a medal on the leader of the local Communist Party to the press and the army.¹⁴³ This too would provoke further purges.

In April 1966, with Sukarno's authority substantially diminished, the IRD issued a third forged Muslim Brotherhood statement, this time claiming that Allah was punishing him. The aim, according to the IRD, was to divest Sukarno of any lingering pretensions to near divinity. It resurrected its main line of attack: "Sukarno's indulgence up to his ears in sexual pleasures with cheap and easy women ... has shocked the believers to an intolerable degree."¹⁴⁴ By early 1967, Sukarno had fallen from power altogether.

As with Egypt, the propaganda targeting Sukarno recognized the international dimension to local developments. In addition to pointing out Sukarno's links to communism, it took a less obviously bipolar Cold War approach by taking up the Islam angle. In doing so it misrepresented Sukarno's relationship to Islam in order to antagonize Muslim audiences outside of Indonesia.

Overall, these five propaganda themes demonstrate that IRD black activity was multi-pronged, sophisticated and carefully coordinated. It went far beyond exposing adversaries' lies and misdeeds, and sought to disrupt, exploit rifts and widen divisions. Propaganda became more personal and aggressive when it came to nationalists compared to communists, partly because the British thought it less risky compared to attacking Soviet leaders directly. The material was broadly true when targeting both nationalists and communists, but the sources were fake. This, in turn, gave new meaning to the "facts." Indeed, sometimes to appear credible the fake source incited racial or religious tension. On other times, it incited violence whilst deliberately deceiving audiences that an organized rebel group existed. All the while it blurred

¹⁴³ IRD, "Sukarno/Aidit picture", November 1965, TNA, FCO 168/2386.

¹⁴⁴ IRD, "Muslim Brotherhood No. 3 (anti-Sukarno)", April 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2387.

the line between nationalism and communism and recognized multiple actors of influence, thereby placing the Cold War firmly in a global perspective.

Success and Impact

It is notoriously difficult to assess the often-intangible impact of covert propaganda. The IRD measured outcomes in terms of both press coverage generated by the black productions and reactions to that coverage. For example, the IRD assessed that a forged Chinese Peace Committee circular issued in 1963 had achieved “considerable success”: the forgery was quoted freely in the *Hindustan Times* and in the Italian Socialist Democrat Party’s daily newspaper; quoted almost verbatim in the French communist newspaper *L’Humanité*; mentioned in the *Daily Telegraph*; and denounced in *Pravda*. Coverage of the forgery angered World Peace Council leaders and also angered the Chinese who blamed the Russians for the forgery.¹⁴⁵

Other operations also hit their mark in the local press. IRD officials were pleased that a newspaper in Zanzibar printed their forgery about Soviet racism, and that other sub-Saharan newspapers reacted angrily.¹⁴⁶ To give another example: a Tunisian weekly, *Jeune Afrique*, printed – in full – a forgery supposedly written by the International Institute for Peace. Despite the lack of criticism, the IRD was delighted.¹⁴⁷ Alternatively, local media would simply repeat claims made by the propaganda. For example, a Tunisian daily newspaper, *Le Petit Matin*, and Ankara Radio repeated material by the fake International Committee for the Investigation of Communist Front Organisation.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ IRD, “Chinese Peace Committee Letters”, n.d., TNA, FO 1110/2363.

¹⁴⁶ IRD, “WFDY letter and Declaration (Bulgarian Students)”, March 1963, TNA, FO 1110/2363.

¹⁴⁷ IRD, “IIP letter (Algiers Disarmament Conference)”, June 1964, TNA, FO 1110/2364.

¹⁴⁸ IRD, “INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE INVESTIGATION OF COMMUNIST FRONT ORGANISATIONS Bulletin No 25 (non-consecutive issue) IOJ (journalists)”, Sept. 1963, TNA, FCO 168/2373.

Better still, local media outlets reacted angrily to the material, assuming it was genuine, and the propaganda entered into the broader information ecosystem. In early 1965, newspapers in Aden reported a fake World Federation of Trades Union bulletin playing up troubles in Sudan; one Aden daily printed it in full.¹⁴⁹ A Sudanese newspaper simultaneously reported the work of another fake-Chinese group as genuine.¹⁵⁰ In the summer, a Kenyan weekly reported a fake Novosti bulletin denouncing African socialism (as did the *Hindustan Times*), much to the IRD's delight.¹⁵¹ Two months later, the work of a fake pro-Chinese group in Kenya attracted much local coverage with many assuming it was genuine.¹⁵² Even when denounced as a forgery by the communists, IRD material was still picked up as far afield as the Congolese and Ceylonese press.¹⁵³ All of demonstrated that the IRD's campaign was gaining traction.

The Kenyan press reported material distributed by the fake Freedom for Africa Movement about the 1967 Arab Israeli war;¹⁵⁴ in the same month, multiple newspapers from Pakistan to the Middle East picked up a fake Novosti bulletin on the subject. Some discussed its authenticity, others reported it as fact.¹⁵⁵ The official Moroccan news agency lapped up a follow-up forgery by the World Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁵⁶

Such coverage and documented reactions proved comparatively rare. According to the IRD's records, only around 10% of operations generated press reaction. Far more often, the IRD simply noted "no reactions noted so far." Rather disappointingly, this included both coverage of the propaganda and targets' responses to that coverage. Worse still, there is no sense of impact. Propaganda success should not be measured in terms of number of outputs or

¹⁴⁹ FCO 168/1994

¹⁵⁰ IRD, "WFTU Press Release (Sudan)", Jan. 1965, TNA, FO 1110/1365.

¹⁵¹ IRD, "Novosti booklet 'Socialism for Africa'", June 1965, TNA, FCO 168/2387.

¹⁵² IRD, "'People's Front of East Africa' Leaflet", Sept. 1965, TNA, FCO 168/2386.

¹⁵³ IRD, "IIP Statement on behalf of WCP (Matkovsky)", Dec. 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2920.

¹⁵⁴ IRD, "Loyal African Brothers leaflet No. 674 Russians' failure to support UAR", July 1967, TNA, FCO 168/2921.

¹⁵⁵ IRD, "Novosti handout 'Recent Events in the Middle East'", July 1967, TNA, FCO 168/2921.

¹⁵⁶ IRD, "World Moslem Brotherhood (No. 7) follow-up to Novosti handout", Aug. 1967, TNA, FO 1110/2360.

even number of reactions. The outcome – or “so what” – is important. Too often there was little sense of impact.

The IRD tried to put a positive spin on the lack of reaction by noting that “The lack of reactions to the ‘black’ productions is disappointing but not at all unusual: even so one knows from experience that they quite often do damage.”¹⁵⁷ This defense, based on personal experience over quantifiable metrics, began to raise eyebrows – and perhaps with good reason given the number of CIA and Soviet disinformation operations which achieved well-documented reaction in target countries during the Cold War.¹⁵⁸ Indeed, by 1967, one official refused to show one of the department’s internal six-monthly reports to his superior “unless something more positive could be said.”¹⁵⁹

This, however, offers does not tell the full story. Success was, and remains, more than ensuring that propaganda was a) believed to be authentic, b) picked up in target media, and c) caused a demonstrable reaction in line with the objectives. This would be an incredibly high bar to reach.

The IRD appreciated that understandings of success and failure are nuanced. Sometimes too much coverage and reaction actually constituted a failure insofar as it risked drawing too much attention to a source.¹⁶⁰ Sometimes the IRD deemed an operation successful simply if it preoccupied the adversary’s security authorities with laborious investigations to uncover the source – even if it was intercepted before reaching its intended recipients.¹⁶¹

Exposure was a particularly important, and nuanced, issue. Recognizing that exposure “must always be reckoned with,”¹⁶² the IRD differentiated between disavowable operations, which could be denied but with potential embarrassment, and black operations, which should

¹⁵⁷ Welser to Rayner, 2 August 1966, TNA, FCO 168/2387.

¹⁵⁸ Thanks to a reviewer for pointing this out.

¹⁵⁹ [name unclear] to Welser, 21 February 1967, TNA, FCO 168/2920.

¹⁶⁰ Welser to Joy, 13 August 1969, TNA, FCO 168/3233.

¹⁶¹ IRD, “SEU Annual Report: October 1973 – September 1974”, TNA, FCO 168/5510.

¹⁶² IRD, ‘United Kingdom Brief: Techniques of Covert Propaganda’, June 1960, TNA, FCO 168/19.

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. Accordingly, the IRD included red herrings to throw readers off the British scent in case of exposure.¹⁶³

A 1962 forgery of an International Union of Students booklet offers an interesting example. The IRD worried that it could be too easily traced back to the UK so subtly made it look like a Chinese forgery instead – and widen the Soviet-Sino schism in the process.¹⁶⁴ Plausibility changed with the target audience. The IRD hoped that this booklet would be seen as genuine by “the mass of underdeveloped area readership” but knew that it would raise questions among experienced readers. It was these experienced readers whom the IRD wanted to think it was Chinese.¹⁶⁵ The IRD repeated the trick a few years later by giving a forged Novosti booklet slight Chinese overtones so that, if it was exposed as a forgery, the Russians would blame China and, in the process, widen Sino-Soviet friction.¹⁶⁶ Exposure of the operation as a forgery did not amount to failure.

The UK’s junior relationship with the US often made the IRD’s subtlety unnecessary. Targets often assumed the CIA was behind IRD forgeries, thereby providing a security blanket for the British. Examples are numerous, from WPC forgeries to a notional Italian peace movement, the Soviets often blamed the CIA for IRD handiwork.¹⁶⁷ When the KGB reported an increase in “large scale anti-Soviet propaganda” in 1967, it pointed the finger at “the USA and other imperialist states”. In response, the KGB launched a wave of covert action to “compromise policies of the American government and the most dangerous enemies of the

¹⁶³ For examples see discussion surrounding Indonesian propaganda in TNA, FCO 168/1395.

¹⁶⁴ Barker, untitled minute, 2 February 1962, TNA, FCO 168/789.

¹⁶⁵ IRD, “Comments on 16 Years of the IUS”, n.d., TNA, FCO 168/789.

¹⁶⁶ IRD, “Novosti booklet “Thoughts of Lenin”, August 1970, TNA, FCO 95/2172.

¹⁶⁷ IRD, “IIP circular (for WPC) on Stockholm Conference on Vietnam”, June 1967, TNA, FCO 168/2921; “An Adult’s ABC of Peace”, September 1973, TNA, FCO 95/2175.

Soviet state.”¹⁶⁸ The UK did not get a mention by name. Likewise, and despite the large UK propaganda effort, the Chinese accused the “Indonesian Army Rightists and Islamic reactionary forces” purging Indonesian communists in late 1965 of being “under the command” of the CIA.¹⁶⁹ This may well have been deliberate. Perhaps, as was the case in India, the Soviets and Chinese did not see the UK threat as anything like the same scale as that posed by the US. Therefore, it became politically useful to present the CIA as omnipotent despite privately recognizing the UK’s handiwork.¹⁷⁰ Either way, the IRD enjoyed a relatively free pass which reduced the direct risk of their operations.

Sometimes exposure had positive consequences. In April 1974, for example, the IRD forged a WPC circular on the dissident novelist Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, who had been recently stripped of his Soviet citizenship. The WPC had kept quiet on the issue for fear of contradicting its supposed stance of defending human rights and intellectual freedom. As hoped, the forgery provoked the WPC to issue a denial which explicitly drew attention to the fact that the WPC had failed to pronounce on the Solzhenitsyn case – a significant and revealing admission in itself. The IRD were even more delighted when the denial reached a wider audience than the forgery.¹⁷¹ British officials had an oddly cavalier attitude towards such consequences. They recognized the uncontrollable nature of black productions and optimistically embraced the idea of unforeseen success.¹⁷² It probably helped that they framed others or, if that failed, hid behind the US. Similarly, perhaps they took comfort from the knowledge that the content – if not the source – was accurate, and so if more audiences were talking about it these issues, then that was no bad thing.

¹⁶⁸ Andropov, “The KGB’s 1967 Annual Report”, 1967, Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, accessed via the Wilson Center Digital Archive.

¹⁶⁹ Anon. “Record of Second Conversation of Premier Zhou Enlai and Vice Premier Chen Yi with Foreign Minister Pak Seong-Cheol”, 11 November 1965, Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives, accessed via the Wilson Center Digital Archive.

¹⁷⁰ McGarr, ‘Fake News’.

¹⁷¹ IRD, “WPC Circular – Solzhenitsyn and European Security”, April 1974, TNA, FCO 95/2176.

¹⁷² IRD, “United Kingdom Brief: Techniques of Covert Propaganda”, June 1960, TNA, FCO 168/19.

Overall, difficulties in demonstrating reactions to propaganda combined with the intangible nature of success prevented the IRD from assessing the impact of the campaign in a formal manner. This eventually counted against them. Black productions survived the drastic cuts to IRD in the early 1970s, when its budget was slashed by more than half,¹⁷³ but the number of operations dwindled to a handful each year. By the middle of the decade, the department was still fighting for survival amidst Cold War détente and was under pressure to move away from secret funding. Officials defeatistly acknowledged that “there is no accurate measure of the effectiveness of information work generally and measuring the effectiveness of IRD in its present form would present even greater difficulty. We can make no useful contribution to such an assessment.”¹⁷⁴ The foreign secretary shut down the IRD shortly afterwards, transferring any residual black propaganda function to SIS. Secrecy and disinformation no longer had a home in the Foreign Office.¹⁷⁵

Conclusion

Recently declassified files reveal that the UK waged a sustained black propaganda program using notional organizations and forged material from genuine organizations. It predominantly targeted the Soviet Union, especially trying to exploit the Sino-Soviet split and to prevent a communist advance into post-colonial Africa. The campaign also targeted Egyptian activity in Yemen, Indonesia, and Rhodesia – all broader UK covert action hotspots in the 1960s.

Analysis of the program and its constituent pieces of propaganda reveals three key findings. First, all black productions were negative; none sought to praise the UK, but rather to attack opponents. Interestingly, this was broadly similar in principle to Soviet disinformation.

¹⁷³ Greenhill, ‘IRD Mark II, 28 July 1971, TNA, FCO 95/1007.

¹⁷⁴ anon. ‘Information Research Department’ n.d., TNA, FCO 79/182.

¹⁷⁵ David Owen, *Time to Declare*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1991) p. 348.

According to the CIA, the promotion of communist ideology “was not an essential factor” in black propaganda operations. Instead, their objective was to “to compromise, discredit, and ultimately destroy the governments, organizations and individuals most likely to block the increase of Communist and Bloc power in the area concerned”.¹⁷⁶

The IRD was far more aggressive, personal and direct in targeting nationalist leaders compared to targeting communists. The IRD named, shamed and smeared specific nationalists ranging from members of the Tanzanian government to the president of Indonesia. By contrast, black propaganda targeting communism sought to turn audiences against Moscow by exposing Soviet duplicity and expansionism. Linked to this, the IRD relied on notional groups to a far greater extent when targeting Africa compared to the Soviet Union. This provided freedom to be more aggressive and direct compared to when forging, say, international front communiqués which needed to be more restrained to remain credible. It is worth noting, however, that the UK was unwilling to stir indignation among black audiences on the Rhodesia question but happy to do so on communism. This all reflects an overarching British caution in covert action targeting the Soviet Union compared to elsewhere.¹⁷⁷

Second, the forgeries, by the IRD’s own admission, lacked tangible success. The IRD had a reasonably sophisticated view of impact but struggled to translate this into metrics. This became problematic when the department faced serious budget cuts. It became even more problematic when the 1976 Labour government asked why the Foreign Office, as opposed to SIS, was even conducting such activity at all. Nonetheless, the IRD’s musings on exposure, disavowable, black and untraceable operations was surprisingly nuanced and modern, countering more simplistic views that a successful forgery was simply one that stayed secret

¹⁷⁶ Quoted in Paul M. McGarr, ‘Fake News’, p. 2.

¹⁷⁷ Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny*.

and changed minds. That said, the IRD still struggled to demonstrate a track record of success: a rather underwhelming outcome.

Third, most of the productions were broadly factually accurate – if selectively edited. They all had fake sources, whether through forgery of genuine organizations or the creation of notional groups, thereby rendering them black propaganda. Using lies to peddle “truths” was morally more acceptable to a liberal democracy than using lies to peddle a mixture of truths and more lies, in which the Soviets specialized. In this sense the IRD can be distinguished from other Cold War actors such as the KGB. Fake sources simply ensured that truths were credible and more likely to be heeded by the target audience – a common justification of democracies’ use of grey and black propaganda in the Cold War and today. This reflects a long-standing British approach of identifying the most effective channels for getting its material “out there” with the optimum prospects of achieving the desired impact, whilst recognizing the effective propaganda needs to be truthful. This perhaps amounts to a British way in propaganda.¹⁷⁸

Importantly however, this justification – based on a division between source and content – was flawed. The propaganda sought to encourage a reaction, and the facts mixed with emotion, encouragement and instructions. Sometimes this was subtle, such as in the case of fake think tanks which presented facts and allowed the audience to form their own judgement. On other occasions, for example with forged Muslim Brotherhood material and notional African or leftist groups, the emotion and encouragement were both explicit and aggressive. The fake source, and the emotion associated with it, deliberately resonated with the emotions of the target audience and created a prism through which accurate “facts” were reinterpreted. Sometimes incitement of indignation – and potentially of violence or racial/religious hatred – was an unavoidable consequence of maintaining credibility when posing as certain organizations. On other occasions, it was a deliberate aim. Accurate claims

¹⁷⁸ Thanks to a review for pointing this out.

made by notional resistance groups were misleading because they implied a false sense of opposition which the IRD hoped would inspire others to take confidence from the misleading impression that they were not alone. On all occasions, the IRD chose carefully which source to use. It is wrong and simplistic to justify the propaganda simply on the grounds that the claims made were broadly accurate. The fake source was significant in itself.

This article offers preliminary conclusions on this propaganda program. Future research is necessary to examine reactions in the local press and archival material held in non-western archives to analyze the impact of the propaganda. This article has confined itself to assessing the UK's own monitoring and perceptions of impact. The propaganda likely sparked reaction not picked up back in London. Likewise, it would be interesting to see if certain themes, audiences, or targets generated more reaction than others.

Nonetheless, the recent declassifications unequivocally demonstrate the UK's sustained black propaganda program. They enable a reevaluation of UK propaganda work during the Cold War. Taking an international approach, it demonstrated a complex interplay of communism, nationalism, and local rivalries. There can no longer be any doubt: the UK systematically used disinformation to attack and disrupt adversaries.