# Subverting Nkrumah: the Information Research Department and the practice of neo-colonialism

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The British state's authoritarianism has been integral to its international operations and long neo-colonial histories

In recent years we have seen numerous examples of the British state's suppression of dissent and civil liberties, obfuscation of public oversight, and secrecy in its policing and security operations. The 2023 Public Order Act and expanded police powers have been used to impose severe sentences on peaceful protestors, as in the five-year sentences handed down to those who blocked the M25 motorway in 2022.[1] Responding to this sentence, Michel Forst, the UN special rapporteur on environmental defenders, issued a statement questioning 'how a sentence of this magnitude can be either reasonable, proportional or serve a legitimate public purpose', and warning of the threat posed to citizens' fundamental freedoms.[2] Similar sentiment was expressed by the UN Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk in his condemnation of the proscription of Palestine Action in July 2025. Türk warned that the proscription order conflated protected speech with

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acts of terrorism and urged the UK government to rescind the order.[3] The 'spycops' scandal and resultant undercover policing inquiry have also revealed flagrant breaches of civil liberties carried out by the police over decades; and he conduct of the inquiry itself descended into yet another exercise in blocking public oversight of the security services, police and state actors that had committed and abetted serious crimes against members of the public.[4] Lastly, investigative journalists such as Matt Kennard have been subject to profiling and blacklisting by the UK Foreign Office and other departments due to their critical reporting on UK foreign policy.[5] These recent examples represent new cases of British state authoritarianism, but they are manifestations of much deeper and longer historical currents, and it is these which are the subject of this article, which particularly focuses on the activities of the Information Research Department (IRD) in Ghana.

Writing on British secret policing and political repression in the mid-1970s, Tony Bunyan noted that from the end of the nineteenth century a proliferation of legislative acts, government powers and repressive state agencies sought to clamp down on internal dissent and hide the inner workings of the state from public scrutiny.[6] E.P. Thompson described this array of state powers and institutions as the 'secret state', and noted that British security agencies and operations maintained a level of invisibility and unaccountability that their counterparts in the CIA or FBI could only envy.[7] This secrecy and opacity constitutes a core characteristic of the authoritarian practices of the British state. And, whilst agencies of the British secret state such as MI5, MI6 and Special Branch may be familiar to many, it is a more obscure Foreign Office department that is the concern of this article, namely, the Information Research Department mentioned above.[8]

Through examining IRD activities in decolonising Africa, my argument is that any understanding of the authoritarianism of the British state must be attuned to its international operations and its neo-colonial histories.

## The Information Research Department

IRD operated from 1948 to 1977. Its existence was an official secret throughout this period, and knowledge of its functions only became public in 1978 following journalistic investigations into a number of front organisations.[9] IRD was founded with the aim of combatting and countering Soviet propaganda and subversion efforts in Britain and Europe in the early years of the Cold War. Established under

the auspices of Ernest Bevin, IRD's original mission was to produce 'third force propaganda' that extolled the benefits of British social democracy, in contrast both to the unrestrained capitalism of the USA and the totalitarian communism of the USSR. In recent years, Bevin has been deployed as a totemic figure by Keir Starmer's increasingly authoritarian and rightward-tacking Labour party leadership in order to justify internal and national policy.[10] Starmer and foreign secretary David Lammy have both drawn on Bevin's legacy to justify strengthening NATO involvement in opposition to 'the Kremlin', and a 'progressive realist' foreign policy that seeks to halt 'irregular migration' to Britain.[11] Bevin's enthusiasm for British imperialism is an unremarked undercurrent to such rhetoric. His establishment of a clandestine propaganda and subversion unit, and his authoritarian anti-communist impulses, remain unmentioned in Starmer and Lammy's interventions.

By the early 1950s, however, the original mission had been dropped, and IRD began to engage in a series of globe-spanning operations to counter suspected Communist subversion, pumping out anti-communist propaganda and advancing the interests of NATO and the West in an expanding Cold War. IRD and its agents worked closely with MI5 and MI6 to gather and share intelligence and conduct covert propaganda and subversion efforts. IRD's relatively small staff were reliant on the personnel and administrative capacity of other Foreign Office departments to conduct their operations, most notably the Diplomatic Service: British diplomatic missions and staff played an essential role in feeding back information to IRD in Whitehall, distributing propaganda materials and cultivating potential recipients of propaganda.

Beyond the geopolitical imperatives of the emergent Cold War, it was the decolonisation of the British Empire that provided the other major dynamic in directing IRD operations. IRD operated under the logic that opposition to British imperial rule could provide an easy opening for communist infiltration of anti-colonial movements. Through this conflation, the activities of all manner of anti-colonial or anti-imperialist groups and leaders that ran counter to the interests of the British state could be construed as potential evidence of communist subversion, thus justifying the intelligence gathering, surveillance, propaganda campaigns and psychological warfare operations that it conducted in its campaigns of opposition.

IRD materials can be broadly categorised into two main types.[12] The first were high-level intelligence reports designed for internal use within the British state, and

also for selective passing on to heads of state, security services and other agencies in allied countries. All this material was officially a state secret, and it routinely drew on intelligence gathered by the military, MI5 and MI6. The second and much more numerous type consisted of anti-communist propaganda materials that were provided on an unattributable basis to a range of contacts. These could be MPs, journalists, academics, senior police officers, government ministers and more, both in Britain and abroad - people who could, theoretically, be trusted to draw on these materials in their reporting, public pronouncements and shaping of policy. This second type of material was claimed to be rooted in the factual and objective intelligence that constituted the first type of IRD material. Whilst the informational content of IRD propaganda materials may have been factual (although there is evidence this wasn't always the case[13]), the obscuring of original sources and use of middlemen posing as the genuine authors for such information was entirely deceitful.[14] This must be understood when analysing IRD operations; the context in which information is presented is clearly significant in shaping the way such material is designed to be interpreted and consumed.

## IRD operations in Ghana

This article takes as a case study IRD operations in Ghana, a state that was of central importance to the project of decolonisation in Africa. Ghana gained independence from Britain on 6 March 1957, becoming the first state in sub-Saharan Africa to achieve independence from formal European colonisation. This independence had been hard-won, through mass mobilisation and widespread social and political opposition to British rule. Central to this struggle was Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first prime minister and later president and the leader of the Convention People's Party (CPP), which came to be the central political vehicle for the nationalist movement. Under Nkrumah's leadership, Ghana soon became a central base for the anti-colonial struggles being waged across Africa. Nkrumah and the CPP's Pan-African commitments saw Ghanaian funds and aid channelled to anti-colonial movements across the continent, and a host of Pan-Africanist organisations and institutions founded and headquartered in Ghana.[15] Throughout the 1960s, Nkrumah would become increasingly invested in an 'African socialism' and the socialist development of the Ghanaian state and society. These factors meant that Ghana was of particular interest to IRD: first, it was clearly a highly influential site in the struggle for decolonisation in Africa; second, Nkrumah's increasing investment

in socialism meant that he and Ghana were suspected of operating as vectors for the communist infiltration of the anti-colonial movements across sub-Saharan Africa.

## The opening stages

IRD began to take a consistent interest in Ghana from 1960, at which point Nkrumah was less strident in his socialist politics and ambitions; as he and the CPP pressed on with a programme of socialist transformation, IRD and the British government became increasingly hostile. On 19 October 1960, the British embassy in Accra telegrammed the Foreign Office's Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO) with information about a dispute arising between Nkrumah and US representatives.[16] Nkrumah had stated at a meeting of the Ghana Red Cross Society that he had 'several talks with Mr Khruschev and one thing I am sure of … is that Russia does not want war'.[17] (Khruschev was premier of the USSR from 1958 to 1964.) This statement had incensed the Americans, with their embassy in Accra briefing that it was time for Nkrumah to decide which cold-war camp he was in.

E.B. Boothby, head of the Foreign Office's Africa Department, proposed a response which would draw on IRD's expertise.[18] Boothby noted that Nkrumah was adopting positions that were becoming close to those of a communist 'fellow traveller'.[19] He also noted Ghana's regional significance, worrying that if Nkrumah's position went unchallenged this could damage British and allied interests in West Africa. These were very much material interests as Britain had significant investments in Ghana, notably in the Volta Dam. Boothby requested that IRD place stories in African papers 'accusing Nkrumah of taking, in East-West matters, what is no better than a fellow travelling line, and one that must be clearly distinguished from the true African view of non-commitment'.[20] IRD responded that it was impractical to place comment in the African press due to the likelihood that Nkrumah wouldn't notice the story or else would recognise it as a hit-piece instigated by Western powers or African rivals.[21] It was proposed instead that the Sudanese prime minister could be leaned on to send a letter to Nkrumah warning him of being too close to the Soviets, as had been done previously.

This 1960 example demonstrates a number of tendencies and capabilities that would shape IRD operations in Ghana in the 1960s, and the overall British position on Nkrumah. First, there was a view that amenability to Soviet leadership, or else

not outright indifference or hostility to the USSR, needed to be combatted with anti-communist propaganda efforts. Second, there was a belief that the British state and Foreign Office knew what the 'true African view' was. Conveniently, this was a position that didn't threaten British interests or material investments in the continent. Third, there was a tactic of calling upon IRD for placing unattributable comment in the national press of another state in order to explicitly advance positions of the British government under false pretences. Such efforts, alongside pressure on other national leaders, would be done entirely secretly and without the knowledge of the intended targets, i.e. Nkrumah, the Ghanaian reading public or indeed the broader African media ecosystem. It was through these means that the British state advanced its geopolitical imperatives, seeking to manipulate public opinion and inflame anti-communist panic through obfuscation and deceit.

## Subversion intensifies

By 1963, Nkrumah and the CPP were pushing ahead with the socialist reorganisation of the Ghanaian economy, politics and civil society, and were as committed as ever to Pan-Africanist anti-colonial struggle. By this time the Trades Union Congress, women's groups and youth movements had been folded into the ruling CPP, and in 1964 Ghana became a one-party state.[22] This was in the mode of other socialist states that positioned the revolutionary or national-liberatory party as the vehicle for the socialist and anti-imperialist transformation of the nation. Naturally these efforts perturbed IRD and the Foreign Office.

On 9 August 1963, the IRD information officer attached to the British embassy in Accra sent back a report detailing the situation in the 'information field' in Ghana, and his own efforts within it.[23] The report discussed the ramping up of IRD's anti-communist propaganda campaign and the cultivation of high-level contacts in the Ghanaian state apparatus and civil society. The information officer was A. Hornyold, who had been working to penetrate the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Under his direction, unattributable material and intelligence reports were being passed to the principal secretary and the director of protocol.[24] Hornyold suggested that the latter, a particularly important figure, had 'some influence with the foreign minister'.[25] The report further stated: 'Material exposing Communist penetration of Ghanaian information organs, chiefly "The Spark", has been provided on request for the Director of Protocol'. *The Spark* was the political

journal of the Ghanaian government's Bureau of African Affairs, Ghana's central Pan-Africanist coordinating body.

Hornyold's report also discussed the increase in the supply of material to the Special Branch of the Ghanaian police. Special Branch was being provided with a number of regular IRD digests, such as 'Communist Activities in Africa' [and] 'African Review', publications that were collations of intelligence reports drawn from British security services and diplomatic missions.[26] Furthermore, the British embassy was providing 'Special Branch with IRD material specially designed to expose Communist penetration and manipulation of Ghanaian information organs, notably "The Spark"'.[27] On the topic of manipulation of the press, Hornyold states that he had contacted a number of editors of Ghanaian newspapers to whom unattributable materials were being passed. In closing, the report states that the most valuable aspect of the intensification of IRD operations was the feeding of material into Special Branch and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Through such efforts, it was claimed, the ministers of defence and foreign affairs had been influenced.

By 1963, IRD's propaganda and subversion campaign against Ghana had significantly intensified. IRD and the Foreign Office were attempting to sow division within the Ghanaian state and embolden those sceptical of the Pan-Africanist and African socialist projects articulated by Nkrumah and the CPP. This was an ominous development: key actors in the 1966 coup that ousted Nkrumah would be drawn from the senior leadership of the Ghanaian police. IRD's efforts in the 'information field' represented the opening moves in a psychological warfare campaign that sought to turn public opinion against Nkrumah, his allies and the political projects he stood for.

## Smear campaigns and coup-plotting

From 1964, IRD's psychological warfare campaign against Nkrumah's Ghana was expanded through a 'mailing-in' operation that sent thousands of pamphlets into the country discrediting Nkrumah's key advisors, his policies and Nkrumah himself. These pamphlets were produced and distributed under the guise of originating from Ghanaian dissidents, notably students who were living in Europe.[28] It was intended that the pamphlets would reach 'a wide audience including MPs, teachers, soldiers, police, lawyers, and middle rank Government and Party officials, as well as the

top civil servants and the top Party officials'.[29] The mailing-in operation began by targeting Nkrumah's close advisors and ideological allies.

Exemplary here was the pamphlet attacking Kodjo Addison, director of the Kwame Nkrumah Ideological Institute. The Ideological Institute had been established in 1961 to train the cadre of the CPP and educate them in Nkrumah's social and political philosophy. External courses were provided for members of African nationalist and anti-colonial organisations outside of Ghana.[30] Despite the fact that Addison - as stated by Ama Biney - was not a socialist, his position at the institute made him a prime target.[31] IRD and the British state saw the institute as a key battleground in the struggle for influence during the Cold War, due to its training in socialist thought and practice, and its connections to anti-colonial movements across Africa. The IRD smear pamphlet claimed that Addison and those like him were leading Nkrumah astray because they were committed to international communism. The pamphlet stated: 'The purposes that drive these few men are not a love for Ghana, or for Africa. Their greed for power drives them to sabotage Pan Africanism and work for new recolonizers'.[32] The 'recolonizers' here were the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc states who were sending aid and advisors to Ghana. This claim was distinctly ironic given its appearance in a British psychological warfare operation that amounted to the neo-colonial subversion of the newly independent Ghana.

By 1965, the IRD pamphlets were attacking Nkrumah himself. This was spurred by the publication of Nkrumah's book *Neo-colonialism: the last stage of imperialism*, which outlined how formal political independence for African states was undercut by continued economic domination by Western imperialist powers.[33] This economic dependency was often maintained by military interventions, subversion and the backing of reactionary governments and coup-plotters. Unbeknownst to Nkrumah, IRD and the British state were already doing the same to him. The attack pamphlet stated that Nkrumah was now fully in hock with the 'ideological commissars' at the Ideological Institute and had forfeited the loyalty and support of the Ghanaian people.[34] He had become a 'FEEBLE MINDED and NON-AFRICAN weakling' who was in thrall to the 'recolonizers'. In supposedly abandoning his African philosophy and ideology for Soviet-aligned communism, he had resigned Ghana to the same dangers that had been posed by Western 'imperialism-colonialism'.[35] By July 1965, 490 copies of this pamphlet had been

posted to 'leading personalities, universities, schools, youth organisations [and] newspapers' across Ghana.[36]

On 24 February 1966, a successful coup overthrew Nkrumah and removed the CPP from power. A senior figure in the coup was John Harrley, who was commissioner of police in 1966, and would go on to hold the ministries of the interior and foreign affairs under the coup government. We can draw a straight line here between Harrley, one of the leading coup-plotters, and the IRD subversion campaign - through its channelling of anti-communist propaganda and intelligence to Ghanaian Special Branch and the police. Following the coup Harrley became a vociferous critic of Nkrumah's communist connections and sympathies, which were used as a core justification for his removal. Harrley welcomed and utilised an IRD information officer, as well as IRD books and publications, in his role in the post-Nkrumah government.[37]

Following the coup, Sir John Ure, a senior British diplomat who worked for IRD, wrote an after-action report on IRD's role in Ghana. I defer to Ure for the final word on IRD's activities in Ghana: 'The African, Editorial and Special Operations Sections of IRD have, throughout, worked in very close liaison over the treatment of Nkrumah's Ghana; this treatment has aimed at contributing to the creation of an atmosphere in which Nkrumah could be overthrown and replaced by a more Western-orientated government'.[38]

## Conclusion

What is the contribution of studying IRD operations in Ghana in the 1960s to an understanding of contemporary authoritarian state practices in Britain? I return here to E.P. Thompson's essay on the secret state. Thompson was attentive to the way in which: 'The rapid erosion of empire has perforce retracted the imperial ideology, has brought it back home, into the security services, the army and the police, where experience gained in Ireland, India, or Rhodesia, looks restively for new fields of application - these services are the last refuges of imperialism, within which a ghostly imperial ideology survives its former host'.[39] My view, shared by many other critical scholars of British state repression, policing and empire, is that the 'retraction' of imperial ideology into domestic governance has been a continual feature of the British imperial project from its inception.[40] Thompson's broad thrust remains accurate, however.

The experience and management of empire, decolonisation and neo-colonisation has indelibly shaped the expansion and operations of British state authoritarianism, and more specifically the secret state. Adam Elliott-Cooper and Julian Go, alongside others, have highlighted how tactics and practices honed in colonial counter-insurgency campaigns in places such as Kenya and Malaya were deployed to police racialised minorities in Britain in the late twentieth century. IRD's global structure and operations provided a feedback mechanism in much the same way. The same practices of psychological warfare and subversion used in Ghana were deployed in Britain against figures and groups associated with the left wing of the Labour Party, the trade union movement and organisations like the Anti-Apartheid Movement and World Peace Council.[41]

The historical and political trajectories that led to the current conjuncture are, in some ways, routed through Ghana and the IRD offices in Whitehall in the early 1960s. In recent years, the UK Foreign Office has pumped tens of millions of pounds into private and non-profit organisations that expose and counter 'disinformation'.[42] These efforts are focused solely on states and groups deemed hostile to the British state, with the British media establishment routinely failing to mention the Foreign Office funding of such organisations when they are drawn on for comment.[43] More disturbingly, Middle East Eye reported in 2019 that a social media network named 'This is Woke' had been established with the covert backing of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism at the UK Home Office.[44] 'This is Woke' was used to target young British Muslims, amongst others, as part of the British government's Prevent counter-radicalisation strategy. Through such means, IRD's ghost still lingers in twenty-first century Britain.

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## Notes

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12. See Lyn Smith, 'Covert British Propaganda: The Information Research Department: 1947-77', *Millenium* 1980, Vol 9 No 1, pp67-83. Smith's work was one of the first academic studies of the IRD and is a foundational text for understanding IRD's broad structure, remit and operations. Smith identified the two major typologies in IRD outputs. See also Andrew Defty, *Britain, America and Anti-Communist Propaganda 1945-53: The Information Research Department*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2004 for a more extensive overview of IRD formation and organisational structure.

13. See Lashmar and Oliver, *Britain's Secret Propaganda War*, p156, for claims of IRD involvement in a black propaganda campaign in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. The source they quote claims IRD was complicit in the fabrication of a story, published in the *News of the World*, that Soviet submarines were landing KGB-trained agents off the Irish coast to aid the IRA.

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34. Information Research Department, 'Pamphlet attacking Kwame Nkrumah', 1965, The UK National Archives, London, FCO 168/1861, p1.

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41. See Lashmar and Oliver, *Britain's Secret Propaganda War*, for discussion of IRD interest and attacks on the Labour left. See Andrew Defty, *Britain, America and Anti-Communist Propaganda 1945-53*, Chapter 5, for discussion of IRD's undermining of the World Peace Council Conference in 1950. J.L. Welser, 'Message to J. E. Tyrer', 29 January 1973, The UK National Archives, London, FO 168/5146, reveals that IRD was receiving internal documents from the trade union group of the Anti-Apartheid Movement and passing these on to MI5.

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