



Rediscovering Irregular Warfare: Colin Gubbins and the Origins of Britain's Special Operations Executive by A.R.B. Linderman.

Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2016. Pp. xii, 272. ISBN 978-0-8061-5167-0.

Review by Matthew Ford, The University of Sussex (m.c.ford@sussex.ac.uk).

A.R.B. Linderman's fascinating account of Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE) will provoke more questions than can realistically be answered. But that is a good thing. His exploration of the evolution of irregular warfare doctrine between the First and Second World Wars focuses on the career of Maj. Gen. Colin Gubbins, who eventually led SOE during World War II. The author begins by clarifying how Gubbins's formative experiences with irregular forces in Ireland, Russia, and India are reflected in the handbooks or how-to guides¹ he wrote and used in developing training in irregular warfare doctrine in 1939. During the war itself, he played a central part in forging ties between SOE and the American Office of Strategic Services. In the book's final chapter, Linderman makes a cost-benefit analysis of SOE's efforts to undermine the Axis powers in several occupied countries.

Contrary to those who have downplayed SOE's successes, Linderman contends that, on balance, Allied irregular operations were well worth the limited expenditures made on them. His analysis neatly complements the work of Andrew Hargreaves and Simon Anglim² on the emergence of commando and independent special forces and the evolving practice of irregular operations by a particular commander. Linderman himself concentrates on the SOE as a lever of British influence in Europe and east Asia, making it clear how irregular forces might exert a theater-wide or strategic influence on overall military operations. By coordinating with conventional forces, SOE activity was designed to stretch the resources of enemy regulars, forcing them to overextend their vital lines of communication and expose themselves to the risk of defeat in detail.

Throughout, however, Linderman stresses that SOE's overarching operational goal was not direct engagement with enemy forces. Rather, British irregular force doctrine was founded on a deep appreciation of security authorities' ability to ruthlessly suppress dissent by coercion and reprisals against civilian populations. Linderman highlights the lessons Gubbins learned from British involvement in the conflicts in Ireland, Waziristan, and Palestine. He is much less concerned with SOE's place in bureaucratic politics or imperial and colonial history. Consequently, we do not learn how irregular warfare figured in other initiatives within the War Office and in the colonies. Linderman is acutely aware that his perspective might appear teleological and regularly tries to ward off such an impression; his inattention to organizational and colonial contexts suggests that the advantages of irregular warfare were taken as an indisputable given by the War Office. But the lack of context makes it harder to appreciate fully the relative importance of irregular activities within the British military establishment as a whole.

1. *The Art of Guerilla Warfare* and *The Partisan Leader's Handbook*.

2. Respectively, *Special Operations in World War II—British and American Irregular Warfare* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2013) and *Orde Wingate and the British Army, 1922-1944* (NY: Routledge, 2010).

Another weakness of the book is the author's omission of the findings of Martin Thomas³ regarding intelligence and security services. Linderman's analysis would subsequently have exposed the contradictions inherent in a British policy that advocated repression in the colonies and resistance in Europe. After all, Gubbins argued that "the people's will to war must be sapped and undermined ... so as to induce a craving for peace and for change in the regime.... What is required is to divide the population of the enemy against itself" (156). As it stands, Linderman's interpretation of Mao and Gubbins centers on similarities in technique and Gubbins's dislike of Bolshevism. Overlooked, however, is the paradox that Britain was both an imperial power seeking to maintain colonial hegemony and a liberal democracy seeking to defeat fascism in Europe.

Despite these flaws, there is much to commend this volume. Specifically, A.R.B. Linderman has performed a great service by reminding us that the military's twenty-first-century infatuation with Hybrid and "Grey Zone" warfare is far from new. He also shows that the current literature on paramilitary forces, propaganda, and deniable operations ahistorically omits the influence of ideas that drove their evolution. For this alone, *Rediscovering Irregular Warfare* merits careful reflection by anyone working on past and present forms of irregular warfare.

3. In *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2008). See also James Hevia, *The Imperial Security State—British Colonial Knowledge and Empire-Building in Asia* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2015).