

Title—Imperial Endgame: Britain’s Dirty Wats and the End of Empire
Author—Benjamin Groß-Fitzgibbon
Year—2011

Categories:

Place: British Empire

Time: 1940-1970

Argument Synopsis:

Groß-Fitzgibbon’s book claims that the dominant narrative of the British empire in the twentieth century is a story of decline, disarray and despondency. He claims that historians have overwhelmingly held that Britain’s end of empire was a mismanaged disaster. It is worth noting that he has created a bit of a strawman, because by 2011 (the time of publication) there were much more nuanced arguments surrounding British decolonization that did not unilaterally view the imperial journey through the lens of reactive defeat. Groß-Fitzgibbon’s argument, which he presents as entirely novel, is that the British government developed a concerted imperial strategy designed to secure the colonies for the Commonwealth in an orderly transfer of power while maintaining British influence in the region and strengthening overall Western dominance in the Cold War world. He argues that the British government was considerably successful in maintaining British influence. According to Groß-Fitzgibbon, the conventional wisdom is to claim that Britain’s postwar counterinsurgency campaigns were an ad hoc and uncoordinated reaction to immediate events of the ground, which he sets out to disprove.

Groß-Fitzgibbon acknowledges a handful of works that have addressed colonial insurgencies within the framework of decolonization have only done so as national case studies. His book attempts to provide an overview of all of Britain’s counterinsurgency campaigns during the period of decolonization beginning after the Second World War. He argues that these counterinsurgency campaigns were not clean, even though the decolonization strategy was predicated on notions of liberal imperialism. According to Groß-Fitzgibbon, as is always the case with liberal imperialism, illiberal measures are required to protect it. A 1957 memorandum asserted three main causes of subversive activities in the colonies, being: anticolonialism, communism, and Africanism. Anticolonialism was further subdivided into Russian anticolonialism, radical anticolonialism within Asia and Africa, and American anticolonialism.

He concludes by emphasizing that the development of strong national consciousness within independent colonies that joined the Commonwealth should be seen as signs of Britain succeeding in their imperial mission. The end goal, according to Groß-Fitzgibbon, was always to lift the people of the world from poverty and ignorance to British levels of civilization. The British government just reshaped its imperial mission to better facilitate the conditions of the postwar world. Groß-Fitzgibbon argues that the British imperial missions success is evidenced by only one former colony siding with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Policy developed by the British government was one carefully calculated to allow decolonization to occur on British terms rather than those of the indigenous people
- For those willing to join the Commonwealth, Britain promised education, social welfare, training in the arts of the administration, and security
- The granting of independence to colonies in the commonwealth and their concurrent development of a strong national consciousness were signs that Britain has succeeded in its imperial mission