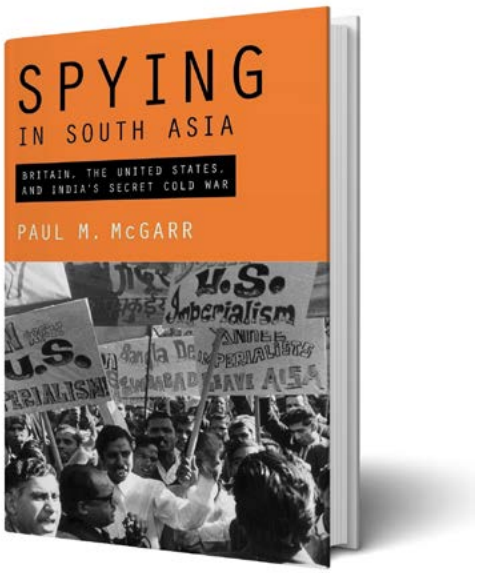
intelligence in public media

Spying in South Asia: Britain, the United States, and India's Secret Cold War

Reviewed by Charles Heard



Author:	*Paul McGarr*
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Reviewer:	Charles Heard is the pen name of a CIA officer.

On April 17, 1978, India's prime minister, Morarji Desai, stood up in parliament to deliver a statement on CIA activities in India. A US magazine, *Outside*, had published an article exposing a CIA mountaineering operation from the 1960s, to emplace nuclear-powered sensors high in the Indian Himalayas to monitor Chinese activities. The operation, which reportedly had been conducted without Indian government knowledge, was described as moderately successful, but at a potentially serious cost: one plutonium power source was lost in an inaccessible part of the mountain range, presumed the result of an avalanche.

Unsurprisingly, the expose caused a firestorm of criticism in Delhi, not least because the lost nuclear material was in an area where it might affect the headwaters of the Ganges. Onlookers expected India to forcefully decry overbearing US action. Instead, to "audible gasps," the prime minister acknowledged not only that the operation had taken place, but that it had been approved by the Government of India "at the highest level," including three prime ministers.

The episode, and its combination of operational optimism with middling results and Indian public disapprobation, is characteristic of India's conflicted intelligence relationship with the US during the Cold War, according to Paul McGarr's admirable new book, *Spying in South Asia*. McGarr, a lecturer in Intelligence Studies at King's College London, has distilled a decade's worth of research across archives on three continents to produce this volume on the intelligence aspects of India's relationships with the United States and United Kingdom during the Cold War. Each of the book's 10 chapters covers a

thematic issue that characterized one or more periods between India's independence in 1947 and the late 1980s. The result is more like a tightly edited volume of contributor essays than a standard chronological history. Chapters can certainly be read as standalones for readers with particular interest in, say, Western intelligence responses to the Sino-Indian war of 1962 or the rise of India in the 1960s as a preferred location for would-be Soviet defectors.

Spying begins roughly in 1946, with London's intelligence services belatedly realizing on the eve of Independence that an Indian national could be placed in charge of intelligence activities in India at any moment. The hasty burning of decades of Intelligence Bureau (IB) records for fear of "anti-British propaganda" filled the Delhi skies with smoke for weeks and served as a less-than-positive sign for future cooperation (15). Nonetheless, pragmatic considerations on both sides, along with shared concern about the People's Republic of China, led to India seeking and receiving support from British intelligence, predominantly via Britain's MI-5 (not SIS, which was prohibited at the time from operating in Commonwealth countries).

India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had his own deeply negative view of intelligence, informed by his having been jailed and harassed by colonial-era police. He accepted India's need to draw on Western resources as Delhi stood up its own apparatus, but remained skeptical of intelligence in general, of Western intelligence activities in his country in particular, and he repeatedly warned subordinates not to be taken in by Western counterparts. Indian intelligence officials at the working level, however, saw more upside in contact with London and Washington, to the point of talking about hiding the scope of engagement from Nehru to avoid his shutting it down (81). CIA was increasingly active in India during this period, in keeping with Eisenhower administration policy, but cooperative efforts to sabotage communist success in South India and to support a fragile Tibetan insurgency were underwhelming.

India's embarrassing defeat in the Sino-India war of 1962 laid bare its intelligence and military shortcomings, in turn driving a period of significant growth in India's intelligence apparatus, much of it midwifed with US assistance and focused on joint activity against China. CIA provided training and logistics support for a new paramilitary force intended to focus on Tibet, and the US helped the IB stand up its Aviation Research Center, a small fleet of US-provided C-46s and smaller aircraft, to conduct photo and technical reconnaissance against PRC forces in western China. Both remain active parts of India's intelligence community. Delhi also allowed American U-2s to overfly and refuel in Indian airspace, and even agreed to host U-2 flights from an airstrip in Charbatia. Nehru's death in 1964 brought this era of increased engagement to a close.

The period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s was dominated, in McGarr's account, by two interrelated themes: the exposure of CIA activities, both in India and around the world; and the rise and long rule of Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi. Multiple exposures of CIA operations during this period had seismic effects on the agency's profile and standing in the United States, of course. But leaders in Delhi naturally focused on the aspects that implicated India. In addition to *Outside*'s exposure of the Himalayan sensor effort, books by Thomas Powers and Seymour Hersh claimed that CIA had run an agent in India's cabinet during India's 1971 war with Pakistan. Hersh went a step further, declaring that the agent was Morarji Desai himself. That allegation caused yet another public furor, and is alluded to in Indian news articles and editorials to this day. Desai sued Hersh in the United States, unsuccessfully, for libel. (227)

Indira Gandhi was notoriously paranoid about CIA activity in India; McGarr quotes former CIA officer Russell Jack Smith derisively claiming that she saw CIA agents "beneath every charpoy and behind every neem tree." (188) McGarr later adds speculation from Daniel Patrick Moynihan's memoir about his time as US ambassador to India, that Gandhi knew her Indian National Congress party had earlier received CIA covert political funding and assumed after it ceased that CIA money must be continuing to go *somewhere* in India. (216) McGarr recounts several episodes of Gandhi's visitors coming away perplexed that she raised CIA or alleged foreign interference out of the

blue and appeared to credit even far-fetched ideas about their scope.

Gandhi's routine public invocation of an ill-de-fined "foreign hand" to blame for setbacks in India reinforced and energized a conspiracy-heavy and US-skeptical public political discourse that continues in India to the present. This naturally contributed to a cooling of intelligence engagement, with most of the last two chapters of the book focused on intelligence flaps and their reinforcing negative effects. After Gandhi's assassination in 1984, her son Rajiv became prime minister. McGarr characterizes his term as one of unfulfilled opportunity for warming intelligence ties, before his own killing in 1991, as the Cold War era drew to a close.

McGarr is a detail-oriented but engaging writer, with an obvious love for the subject matter and a dry wit he sometimes allows to show through. He describes CIA officer Howard Imbrey, whose predecessor in Mumbai had to be withdrawn after an alcohol-fueled fall from a second-story window, as more focused on his job and "less interest[ed] in the potentialities of unpowered flight." (77) If any academic volume on intelligence could be said to be absorbing, it is this one. McGarr's copyeditors at Cambridge let him down, however, irritating at least this reviewer with a steadily increasing number of typos that distract from what is otherwise a set of well-constructed narratives.

The author's introduction and conclusion are harshly critical of decision makers in Washington and London. He describes their activities in India during this period as "misdirected, maladroit, and counterproductive," informed by flawed assumptions about what covert activity is capable of achieving and under what conditions (262–3). This criticism is valid to a point, but it is also impractical about what was achievable given the circumstances. Fresh openings or early successes did give way, time and again, under the pressure of ideological differences and political tensions, as McGarr says. But also, as he acknowledges, the United Kingdom and the United States regularly prioritized other goals over their activities in India. India was not a Cold War backwater, certainly, but neither was it driving US conceptions of national interest or policy making during this period. Nor should it have been. A truly well-calibrated intelligence approach to India probably would have lain somewhere between *Spying in South Asia's* centering of it, on the one hand, and Nixon's dismissal of it altogether, which McGarr correctly criticizes as reductive. (192) But it is far from clear that would have led to substantially more success.

Qualms aside, practitioners looking at contemporary competition with the PRC in the Indo-Pacific, who see India's potential and feel tempted to draw the obvious-seeming conclusion, would do well to absorb McGarr's caution. Indian leaders do not see their nation and its people as a burgeoning ally of the rules-based international order, but as a would-be equal and independent center of international power whose needs and interests must be accommodated by Washington or London, not bargained over. Faulty assumptions—and misconceptions about alignment—have derailed cooperation before and could easily do so again.

Besides, to borrow Faulkner's now-cliched line, the intelligence foibles of Cold War India are never dead; they're not even past. In 2021, locals in the Indian state of Uttarakhand suspected that flash floods, which killed dozens, had been caused by heat from the lost Himalayan sensor. Just this past August, faced with regional instability after Bangladesh Prime Minister Hasina's ouster from power, Indian media and some Indian officials, not to mention Hasina herself, warned darkly that a US "foreign hand" was responsible and shaping developments. Old habits are hard to break.

I warmly recommend *Spying in South Asia* to anyone seeking to better understand India's history with, and contemporary reactions to, US and UK intelligence agencies and their operations. It is readable, richly researched, and persuasive. And until India's intelligence writers—a group whose output McGarr accurately sums up as "self-serving accounts of former intelligence officers" and "sensationalist works" of conspiracy (12)—publish a better account, this is likely to be the definitive volume on the period and its aftereffects. ■