

CIA Covert Operations:
Preservation of Democracy and American Economic Dominance

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The Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA, was formed under the National Security Act of 1948 to gather and collect foreign intelligence and safeguard U.S. national security. However, it became notorious for its involvement in several covert operations, such as the intervention of the Italian election in 1948, Project Ajax, and Operation Mongoose. All operations were ideologically, politically, and strategically justified as attempts to protect the United States and surrounding allies from the spread of communism, but had other underlying motives of maintaining American economic influence, particularly within the oil industry. Various strategies were taken to carry out the operations, including threats of military involvement, manipulation of the mass public, and economic control, among other methods of anti-communist propaganda. Two out of three of these plans resulted as victorious in achieving short-term goals of removing Communists from leadership, as well as long-term goals of preserving democracy and maintaining the United States' powerful influence.

The Truman administration, through the CIA, interfered with the Italian elections of 1948 to prevent a Communist victory. Its political justification for the intervention was that communism was an immediate and urgent threat that could have led to a civil war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.¹ This was a highly successful operation, as the CIA intervened with the Italian economy, news network, and Church that influenced the overwhelming Christian Democratic vote to achieve their goal of preventing Communist leadership in Italy.

The cause of intervention on behalf of the United States began as Communists seized power of various parts of Europe in early 1948. In Italy, the Italian Communist party, a highly organized, disciplined, and financed association, came in alliance with the militant Italian Socialist party to sweep their influence across free elections. American leaders feared that a

¹ Herring, George, *The American Century & Beyond, U.S. Foreign Relations, 1893-2014*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 321.

Communist victory would “signal the collapse of democracy in Europe... [by] strengthening the bid for power of the Communist parties throughout Western Europe and correspondingly weakening the ability of their moderate middle class and Socialist opponents to resist.”² This threatened the United States directly because it would diminish their influence in Europe if any of their allies collaborated with the Soviet Union.

To carry out their successful operation, the United States took to economic means of manipulation. They threatened to cut off all aid given to Italy if a Communist leader were to be elected into power. Italian citizens, being so economically dependent on the rich powerhouse of the U.S., were then influenced to vote against Communist leaders in the elections. Deportation of American party members in Italy was also threatened, potentially endangering the Italians who were dependent on American relatives who supported them. Millions of dollars were secretly sent to the Christian Democratic and right-wing Socialist parties in Italy to ensure the spread of democratic ideals. The CIA also channeled large amounts of money to newspapers to persuade the Italian public that they had to choose between democracy and totalitarianism, and that there was only one right answer. The United States took action to include Italy in a European recovery program, the State-War-Navy Coordination Committee (SWNCC) that issued economic aid to promote political and social stability in Italy.³ This was a long-term deal to ensure democratic dominance for the remote future.

The Vatican and the government of Alcide De Gasperi were backed by the United States in the midst of their instability. Pope Pius XII ordered Catholic Action, a powerful secular branch of the Italian Church that would put a stop to Communist-inspired strikes.⁴ Communists were

² Miller, James E. “Taking Off the Gloves: The United States and the Italian Elections of 1948.” *Diplomatic History* 7, no. 1 (1983): 36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24911419>.

³ Miller, James E. “Taking,” 38.

⁴ Miller, James E. “Taking,” 44.

also being excommunicated from the Church. The Archbishop of Milan among other religious figures officially condemned communism. Propaganda fueled the idea that it was either Christianity or atheism for the Italians if a Communist leader was elected. De Gasperi met with President Truman in January of 1947 to establish requests for economic aid and overall political support. As parties of the Left responded with a growing campaign of violence, the United States also developed a major military involvement plan in the case of an Italian civil war, where military advisers would be sent to equip internal Italian security forces. With combined efforts of economic support, infiltration of the Church, and threats of military involvement, the U.S. successfully prevented the election of a Communist leader in Italy and achieved their goal of the preservation of democracy and their influence across Europe.

The success of the Italian intervention influenced other covert operations by the Central Intelligence Administration such as Project Ajax. The Middle East had become a target for Communist expansion as many Middle Eastern nationalists were struggling for independence and wanted to exploit the Cold War to their advantage.⁵ Project Ajax was a conjoined operation by the CIA and British forces to prevent the spread of communism into Iran, through infiltration of the political system, economic control, and a successful military coup.

What first alerted the allied nations of potential Communist threat in the Middle East was Krushchev's arms deal and trade agreement with Egypt. The second alarm came when nationalists in Iran voted to take over the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951, a British company that had control over the country's most valuable resource and subjected Iranian workers to poor treatment. The nationalist group was led by newly elected prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, whose government then completely broke off relations with Britain in

⁵ Herring, George, *The American*, 372.

1952. Potential loss of Middle Eastern oil supplies was feared to start another world war.⁶ This was the United States' main reason for intervention; to refute against the nationalization of British property, though this motivation was masked by an emphasis on the Communist threat. It was feared that a domino effect would occur if Iran went Communist, sending a wave of Communist control over the entirety of the Middle East, diminishing the West's control over the area. Eisenhower viewed the Third World peoples as child-like and vulnerable to right-wing propaganda, and Mosaddeq was suspected of either being a Communist or a tool of communism due to his cooperation with Communists when it suited his needs, as well as his unreliable and unpredictable warnings of a Communist takeover.

Thus, in the spring of 1953, U.S. and British forces plotted that it was necessary to replace Mosaddeq with Shah Reza Pahlavi with the justified means of establishing a stable and friendly government that was capable of withstanding aggression and Communist subversion. Eisenhower particularly valued covert operations because he deemed them as "inexpensive and relatively risk-free means to undermine untrustworthy governments."⁷ Local agitators were hired by Kermit Roosevelt, a CIA operative, to destabilize the already fragile Iranian political system. This was carried out through economic methods of purchasing the loyalty of key parts of the army. Officials within the CIA bribed Iranian government figures, reporters, and businessmen. They also bribed street thugs to create riots in support of Pahlavi.⁸

Project Ajax almost backfired a few times, as the favored replacement of Mosaddeq, Shah Reza Pahlavi, was indecisive. However, the operation was saved by Roosevelt's refusal of returning home, the persistence of Iranian dissidents, and the political miscalculations of

⁶ Israeli, Ofer. "The Circuitous Nature of Operation Ajax." *Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 2 (2013): 255. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23470987>.

⁷ Herring, George, *The American*, 374.

⁸ Maar, Henry, Lecture 10, Eisenhower, the New Look, and Third World Nationalism.

Mosaddeq. After Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered the CIA and the British Secret Intelligence Service to organize a military coup, the prime minister was successfully overthrown and replaced by Pahlavi.⁹ A short-term victory was achieved for U.S. policy as U.S. oil companies got 40% interest in the international agreement that replaced the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, and the long-term goal of preserving democracy was attained.

Another major covert operation of the CIA was Operation Mongoose: a plan to remove Fidel Castro from power in Cuba. The plan was approved in November 1961, and developed the CIA's Miami outpost, JMWAVE. After the United States had already been placing bans on all Cuban imports and pushing other allies to do the same, the CIA operation began with intelligence gathering and small-scale sabotages to destabilize Cuba even more. The justification for U.S. involvement was that the Soviet Communist movement was spreading to Cuba, potentially destroying the U.S.-Cuba relationship and reducing the presence of democracy. Castro had already enacted the Agrarian Reform Law which barred foreign ownership of land, made trading deals with the Soviets, and seized U.S. oil companies in Cuba, nationalizing oil fields.¹⁰ With these tensions to maintain American influence, it was adamant to the United States that intervention was necessary to put an end to Castro. However, the operation was ultimately unsuccessful at displacing Fidel Castro from power, as military intervention failed to occur.

The spring of 1962 is where the situation escalated. Schemes were conducted to provoke U.S. military intervention, such as the explosion of a U.S. warship, the sinking of a refugee boat, and holding Cuba responsible if a U.S. space mission failed.¹¹ The CIA supported the

⁹ Israeli, Ofer. "The Circuitous," 257.

¹⁰ Maar, Henry, Lecture 13, Kennedy, Cuba, and the Infamous 13 Days.

¹¹ Herring, George, *The American*, 408.

publications of Anti-Castro propaganda, organized armaments for militant opposition groups, and established guerilla bases throughout Cuba in preparation for a military intervention.¹²

The Mongoose Operation escalated further as the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred in the fall of 1962 when the U.S. discovered the planting of Soviet missiles in Cuba. On October 16, President Kennedy ordered a meeting of the Executive Committee, composed of the National Security Council to debilitate plans of land invasions, naval blockades, and airstrikes.¹³ A “naval quarantine” was announced, demanding the removal of the missiles from Cuba and a vow from the U.S. that retaliation would occur if weapons were launched. Eventually an agreement was made with the Soviet Union to avoid nuclear war. However, a military coup to remove Castro from power in Cuba never happened, deeming the overall operation unsuccessful at achieving their main goals of eliminating the Communist presence within the country.

The CIA was created and used during the time of the Cold War to safeguard U.S. national security against threats of communism. Covert operations such as the U.S. intervention on the Italian elections of 1948, Project Ajax, and Operation Mongoose were conducted to collect foreign intelligence and sabotage Communist efforts of political expansion. The ideological, political, and strategic justifications for these operatives included preventing the election of Communist leaders, protecting U.S. democratic relations with foreign countries, and maintaining American economic dominance within the oil industry. Two out of three of these projects were successful at achieving U.S. short-term and long-term objectives of prohibiting Communist expansion and preserving American influence in foreign economies.

¹² “The Bay of Pigs Invasion and Its Aftermath, April 1961- October 1962.” U.S. Department of State. Accessed October 16, 2024.
<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/bay-of-pigs#:~:text=Although%20not%20considered%20as%20significant,achieve%20its%20most%20important%20goals.>

¹³ Maar, Henry, Lecture 13, Kennedy, Cuba, and the Infamous 13 Days.