



Operation Valuable Fiend: The CIA's First Paramilitary Strike Against the Iron Curtain

Albert Lulushi

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In 1949, a newly minted branch of the CIA (the precursor of today's National Clandestine Service), flush with money and burning with determination to roll back the Iron Curtain, embarked on the first paramilitary operation in the history of the agency. They hatched an elaborate plan, coordinated with the British Secret Intelligence Service, to foment popular rebellion and detach Albania, the weakest of the Soviet satellites in Europe, from Moscow's orbit. The operation resulted in dismal failure and was shut down by 1954.

In *Operation Valuable Fiend*, Albert Lulushi gives the first full accounting of this CIA action, based on hundreds of declassified documents, memoirs, and recollections of key participants, including Albanian exiles recruited for missions and their Communist opponents. Up till now, the story of the operation has been obfuscated and even distorted. Some blamed the Soviet mole Kim Philby for sabotaging it; the communists credited the prowess of their secret police; and CIA memoirs were heavily sanitized. Lulushi documents a range of factors that led to the failure, from inexperienced CIA case officers outsmarted in spy-vs-spy games by their ruthless Stalinist opponents; to rivalries between branches of the CIA and between the agency and friendly intelligence services; and conflicts among anti-Communist factions that included Albania's colorful exiled leader, King Zog.

The book also shows how this operation served as the proving ground for techniques used in later CIA Cold War paramilitary actions—including some of the same agency operatives—including the coup d'états in Iran and Guatemala and the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.

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TC says

This book attempts to chronicle and analyze one of the first covert operations of the nascent CIA in the early years of the Cold War: the removal of Envar Hoxha and the communists from power in Albania. The theory was simple; break this tiny nation off from the satellite of Soviet influence early and decisively, and spur popular revolutions elsewhere.

It covers over ten years of this plan's machinations, delving into a lot of different things. These include the beginnings of the CIA, and the personalities behind it; the climate and thinking of that early agency, and its goals along with the US's stated public policy; the affairs of other nations trying similar ideas and with competing interests in Albania, including the UK, Greece, and Yugoslavia; the art of spycraft, including the difficulties of communicating with base; and the numerous competing concerns of the people in the Agency-backed "government in exile."

Spoiler alert: the plan failed, miserably, though not in a spectacular fashion--more in slow-motion. The book definitely did not fail, but didn't quite succeed either. It's confusing, because it tries to cover such breadth. The timelines get difficult to follow, because like a lot of books trying to look at a long-running event from different angles, it goes back over itself to present the story from a different side. It's easy to forget that you've already been introduced to someone, because the book itself seems to forget--occasionally, events are repeated as if they hadn't already been discussed; it looks like an editing problem.

The book also draws some conclusions. The last chapter in particular makes the case that this failed operation served as a pathfinder for other CIA operations, some of which were "successful" (in the short-term) such as Guatemala and Iran. But reading the endless details of failed air-drops of operatives and their mostly useless missions, and the constant in-fighting and pettiness of the exiled leaders, who appear more interested in positioning themselves against each other than in saving their homeland, seem to show that it all appeared like nothing more than an expensive, deadly folly that ultimately proved meaningless. Ironically, shortly after this failed operation, Hoxha's own paranoia lead him to disconnect Albania from the Soviet Union, and eventually completely isolate it from everyone, all on his own (though the book leaves open the possibility that the CIA might have had a hand in fueling his paranoia with false information). That the Soviet Union didn't collapse as a result shows just how futile the whole thing really was.

If you can wade thru the details, you can learn a lot of interesting names and events, so it's a good introduction to the cold war, and the dark world of spying and "plausible deniability" in regime change.

Allen Patterson says

I won this book from Goodreads. I found it to be very interesting. I really doubt anyone else on the planet could have done a better job on the topic than Albert Lulishi. His knowledge, research, and presentation all get an A+ from me. This is a must read for anyone who has any interest in the history of the CIA or in Albania's long struggles to be free from Communism.

Julian Douglass says

This is a story of the first attempts by the CIA to change a government aligned with the USSR. The book is a good description of the operations leading up to the event, during the attempts, and the aftermath of the failure to overthrow the regime. Its a good story, especially when reading about it, Mr. Lulushi details all of the issues that happened during the plan, and you could see the plan failing in plain view. The operation, however, did lead to the CIA correcting their flaws and running a much tighter ship in the subsequent decade trying to change regimes in the world. I would read this as not an endorsement of the plans, but as a good history of the operation itself.

Jerome says

A fine, comprehensive history of Project Fiend. Although much of the relevant material and documents have been available for quite some time, Lulushi does a fine job telling the entire story of the operation.

To the extent that Project Fiend has received the attention of historians, a frequent conclusion is that the operation failed because of the involvement of Kim Philby. However, Lulushi disagrees, pointing out that Philby only became involved in Fiend later, and many of the “pixies” had already begun getting captured at that point.

Throughout his book, the author describes the evolution of Project Fiend, and how it was affected by events in Greece and Yugoslavia. Fiend was the first paramilitary operation conducted by the Agency, and Lulushi examines what lessons, if any, the Agency took from the experience. Some of these were practical, such as the use of radios, recordings, and the evaluation of suspected double agents.

Lively and detailed, although some background on the pre-1949 situation would have been nice, and the chapter on Fiend’s lessons seems a little long-winded and meandering. Other than that, this is an interesting and well-written history.
