

OSS Training in the National Parks and Service Abroad in World War II

By John Whiteclay Chambers, II. (Washington, DC: US National Park Service, 2008), 616 pages, with maps and illustrations. Online at http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/oss/index.htm

Reviewed by Clayton D. Laurie

Ostensibly a history of OSS interaction with the National Park Service (NPS), specifically the use of parks as training grounds, *OSS Training in the National Parks and Service Abroad in World War II*, by Rutgers University history professor John Whiteclay Chambers, II, is a much more comprehensive and detailed account of the OSS than the title implies. Indeed, it is one of the more extensive and well-researched histories to have appeared in several years, and it stands to become one of the seminal books on the OSS when published by Rutgers University Press, as currently planned. Commissioned in 2004 to write just a NPS-OSS study, Chambers convinced the park service of the need for a much broader history that placed OSS training activities in the overall context of OSS activities during World War II and its importance as the first centralized intelligence organization in US history. The original concept expanded into the 600-plus-page manuscript available on the NPS Web site. Given this online availability, Chamber's history may well become one of the more popular and widely read works on the OSS.

The first two chapters retell the familiar story of OSS origins. Chambers recounts the background of founder William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan; the connections between those interested in intelligence, "fifth column" activities, and psychological or "political warfare" in Great Britain and the United States; and the fitful start for such endeavors with the formation of the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI) in July 1941. All this, of course, took place amid monumental bureaucratic turf wars between Donovan and the military intelligence offices and the FBI, which claimed responsibility for the nation's intelligence missions but performed them badly. Six months after US entry into World War II, as Chambers details, the much larger and more sophisticated OSS replaced the COI and began organizing and training for global operations. While there is not much new in this traditional interpretation, Chambers covers the terrain well, citing a tremendous number of published and archival sources in a clear writing style that always keeps the reader's attention.

The next five chapters on training are the strongest part of the study and a significant contribution to the existing scholarly literature—filling a gap in OSS history that has existed for far too long and which could form a stand alone scholarly publication. Chambers fully describes OSS-NPS agreements that culminated in the establishment of two large training facilities on park service

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property in the Catoctin Mountains near Thurmont, Maryland (near the presidential retreat then called Shangri-La, now Camp David), and in Northern Virginia's Prince William Forest Park near Quantico (on Chopawamsic and Quantico Creeks). Although many existing histories mention OSS training areas in passing, Chambers covers the topic in great depth—from physical descriptions of the parks, to the hiring of instructors for the OSS Schools and Training Branch and subsequent course development, to the construction of barracks, mess halls, firing ranges, and classrooms.

This history focuses exclusively on the specialized training provided those destined for the OSS operational arms—the Special Operations and Communications Branches, and Operational Groups. The work deals less with those slated for service in Morale Operations, Secret Intelligence, or Counterintelligence Branches, or the Maritime Units, who received most of their training elsewhere in the United States or abroad (Research and Analysis Branch members from academic backgrounds generally had the necessary background to perform their duties without additional training). Chambers discusses other OSS training locations, such as Congressional Country Club, and smaller facilities in the Washington suburbs or in Baltimore but keeps the focus on the bigger bases. While covering OSS training on the macro level, these chapters also represent fine examples of local history relying heavily on many new oral history interviews of veterans who were there.

The final two chapters describe the results of OSS training, as intelligence and paramilitary teams fanned out to the operational theaters in Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Far East. Although Chambers includes mostly standard fare, he does describe new operations, based on oral history interviews, and draws a direct connection between the realistic training new recruits received and OSS operational success abroad. He notes that the methods developed during World War II proved so realistic and practical that they reappeared in postwar training programs of the Central Intelligence Agency and military special operations commands. Chamber's summary and conclusion, wide-ranging and beyond just the OSS-NPS connection, is sober and accurate. He notes failures, as well as accomplishments of the 13,000-member OSS, whose contributions to the Allied war effort, and to the future of American intelligence, far exceeded what proponents and critics alike would have expected from a wartime agency only slightly smaller than a typical US army infantry division.

Of particular note are the many excellent oral history interviews Chambers conducted of OSS veterans who trained in the areas he describes. They personalize the history in ways that archival sources cannot and become especially important as the decades pass and surviving veterans become ever fewer in number. Chambers notes that OSS members, so successful during the war, went on to lives and careers that were equally successful—many of the veterans interviewed for this study are now in their 80s and 90s and remain as active as they were in decades past.

In addition to these rich new oral histories, Chambers has compiled perhaps the most comprehensive bibliography of published and archival material available anywhere on the OSS. Only a few pertinent works are missing from this otherwise exhaustive list. One hopes that revised online and print versions will include these few omissions. Nonetheless, Chambers has thoroughly mined the

records at the National Archives, the Roosevelt and Truman Presidential Libraries, the Library of Congress Manuscript Division, and personal papers held at Princeton University, the US Army Military History Institute, and the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace. The online version of the history contains an intriguing portfolio of maps of the training areas, as well as several score photographs obtained from OSS veterans. (Warning: Readers will need broadband service to download the nearly 7 MB file of illustrations.)

In spite of the rather understated title, *OSS Training in the National Parks* is highly recommended for general audiences interested in a detailed one-volume history describing the origins, people, and operations of the OSS during World War II. Having the searchable manuscript online at the National Park Service Web site is an added bonus. Scholars will find the chapters on training a welcome and long overdue addition to the existing historiography of intelligence and to our understanding of the OSS, while the comprehensive bibliography will prove invaluable to researchers. Although many historians may find much of the early and later chapters in this large manuscript a familiar retelling of oft-told OSS tales that could have profited from judicious editing, these portions do surround some wonderful new and original research on OSS training that is well worth examining.



