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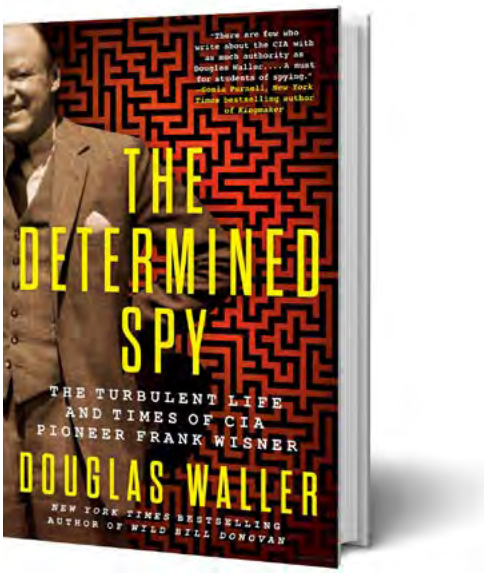
The Determined Spy: The Turbulent Life and Times of CIA Pioneer Frank Wisner

Reviewed by JR Seeger and Ian B. Ericson



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Frank Wisner was a consequential figure in the history of CIA and covert action, as this pair of reviews by veteran intelligence officers makes clear. – The editors.

By JR Seeger

In its first decade of existence, CIA faced numerous challenges, from worldwide Cold War conflicts to the hallways of power in Washington, DC. During this time, the majority of CIA leaders were veterans of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Their world view was shaped by seeing firsthand the devastation of total war and the transformation of the USSR from ally to adversary. One of these leaders was a young lawyer from Mississippi named Frank Wisner. In his short life of 56 years, Wisner created CIA covert action capabilities that remain in CIA today. This monumental biography by the author of *Wild Bill Donovan* delivers an understanding of the man, his times, and his covert action operations. It is a must read for anyone interested in the history and culture of CIA.

A deep understanding of Frank Wisner requires knowledge of the man who lived inside and yet apart from two great US intelligence organizations, OSS and CIA. Both organizations were filled with sons and daughters of privilege. Almost all the early leaders were often labled "male, pale, and Yale." Wisner grew up the son of a Mississippi industrialist and went to the University of Virginia for his undergraduate and law degrees. He was already a US Navy reserve intelligence officer when Imperial Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. He thrived in Naval intelligence, where his legal mind and commitment to detail brought him to the attention of early OSS leaders. Wisner attended a brief OSS training program in October 1943 and received orders for OSS/Cairo. He arrived in December 1943 as the station's chief of reports.

Not long after his arrival, Wisner again came to the attention of OSS leadership through his work in Cairo. According to Waller, he transformed the station reporting both on the collection and production sides by designing collection requirements and by demanding clear and concise reports. His successes in Cairo led to reassignment in June 1944 to Istanbul and then to a command position in Bucharest three months later.

In Bucharest, Wisner came in contact with the Soviet military and intelligence establishment for the first time and came to learn the Soviet tactics designed to make certain that Romania would become a client state. Wisner worked with OSS/X2 (counterintelligence) officer Robert Bishop to understand and counter the Soviet effort. In this first battle against the Soviets, Wisner began to understand better than many in OSS that the Soviet Union was in transformation from a reluctant ally to an implacable adversary.

Waller reports:

Until the end of his mission, Frank Wisner continued to send Donovan's headquarters cables that Moscow was intent on establishing pro-Soviet regimes in all of Eastern Europe.… For the rest of his life, he held a personal grudge against the Russians. In Romania, he began a long cold war against the Soviet Union. (99)

After VE Day, Donovan named three OSS officers to lead collection in Germany: Allen Dulles became the chief in Berlin and the commander of OSS in Occupied Germany; Richard Helms and Frank Wisner took over the operational component responsible for collection in Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Helms and Wisner left Germany in December 1945 after OSS had been disbanded. At that point a much smaller, more bureaucratic Army Strategic Services Unit took on intelligence collection in Germany as the Soviets were ramping up their efforts to control Eastern Europe.

Wisner tried to return to civilian life, but by October 1947 he had joined State Department as the head of a joint military-civilian "coordinating committee on Europe." It was at this time that Wisner became a member of the Policy Planning Staff, which was run by George Kennan. Kennan's May 1948 State memorandum on political warfare sent Wisner down that path for the rest of his federal career.[a] As part of Kennan's plan, Wisner offered a program titled BLOODSTONE, which would become the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), which Wisner managed under the joint command of State, Defense, and the newly formed CIA.

Wisner was known for his ambition and his work ethic. By 1948, he offered a plan for OPC to conduct the following covert action programs: psychological warfare, political warfare (specifically subversion), economic warfare (manipulating adversary banking), "preventative" direct action (paramilitary operations), and a catch-all program titled "miscellaneous." Wisner operated in an administrative shadow world in which few of his supervisors knew anything about OPC activities and President Truman's White House offered little resistance, and even less guidance, on how OPC would counter the Soviet and, by 1949, Communist Chinese threats.

The book's third of four parts[b] (by far the largest), outlines the projects OPC initiated, the bureaucratic challenges Wisner faced, and the eventual fusion in 1951 of OPC with the Office of Special Operations (human intelligence [HUMINT] operations) into a new entity, the Directorate of Plans. The merger had been ordered by Director of Central Intelligence Walter Bedell Smith, who during his tenure as DCI (1950–53) restructured and rationalized an organization that had been largely ignored by the first directors. While Wisner's days of working the "gaps and seams" between State, Defense, and CIA were over, his operational role increased under the first DDP, Allen Dulles, and after August 1951, when he replaced Dulles, who had been made deputy DCI.

a. Archived Department of State memorandum. George Kennan, Policy Planning Staff Memorandum, May 4, 1948. "The Problem: The inauguration of political warfare." Archive.law.upenn.edu

b. Parts one and two address Wisner's youth and activities during World War II, respectively. The final part focuses on Wisner's mental illness and last years of life.

Wisner's covert operations defined the first decade of the Cold War. Waller takes the reader through each effort and details why they succeeded or failed. He manages to do so without being either a cheerleader or a hostile prosecutor of Wisner or his programs.

Part Four, which goes into the late 1950s and the first five years of the 1960s, Waller describes Wisner's tragic descent as DDP into manic-depression—now referred to as bipolar disorder. Genetically predisposed to the illness, and after some time in a mental health institution where he received electro-shock therapy, he briefly returned to CIA and a post in London before he retired. About three years after his retirement he committed suicide in 1965.

As with his biography of Donovan, Waller's work on Wisner is thoughtful and exceptionally well-researched. He is a master of blending archival research with letters and papers of his subject as well as of his subject's peers and even adversaries. Waller brings to light the Cold War complexities that faced four presidents and five DCIs during Wisner's career. Even if a reader is not interested in Wisner's life or CIA covert action, this book is a must read for anyone interested in the early Cold War and the creation of the intelligence establishment that remains critical today. ■

By Ian B. Ericson

The legend of CIA was built thanks to a founding generation of officers who cut their teeth in the OSS during World War II and leveraged that experience to confront a bold and aggressive new Soviet adversary. Frank Wisner, OSS veteran and inaugural head of CIA's Directorate of Operations, personifies the OSS's reputation for daring and indefatigable devotion to mission. Douglas Waller's new biography of Wisner, *The Determined Spy*, is an invaluable addition to the literature on this remarkable, tragic figure without whom the early history of CIA could not be written.

Wisner was born in 1909 and raised in Laurel, Mississippi. His father was a wealthy lumber entrepeneur who had married into the business. Waller's description of Wisner's childhood, education, and overall formation is thorough, perhaps even too thorough, given some of the gaps in the author's account of Wisner's work at CIA. Wisner excelled athletically and academically at the University of Virginia, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1931, followed by a law degree in 1934, both with top academic honors. He continued to shine as a New York attorney at the law firm of Carter, Ledyard, and Milburn, and in 1936 married Polly Knowles, the daughter of a New York shipping magnate. Wisner was flourishing professionally and personally.

Like so many of his generation, however, it was during WWII that Wisner found his purpose. In part due to his New York law connections, Wisner obtained a position in the OSS in 1943. He served with distinction in Cairo, Bucharest, and finally Berlin after Germany's surrender in May 1945. Waller's account of Wisner's time in OSS is detailed and compelling, especially his descriptions of Wisner's tours in Romania and Germany. Wisner became intimately familiar with the intelligence business, particularly as it related to covert action—activities intended to secretly influence the political, military, or economic conditions of a foreign country. He also saw firsthand the depravities of the Red Army and the communist system it forced upon the citizens of Eastern Europe. Wisner grew to love Romania and its people during the war, and watching the Soviets snuff out Romania's independence profoundly affected him and influenced his aggressive anti-communist efforts while at CIA.

Wisner returned to the practice of law—an industry that no longer suited his temperament —with the OSS's dissolution at the end of September 1945. In 1948, George Kennan, Director of the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department, recruited Wisner back into the fight as the first head of CIA's covert action arm, the inconspicuously named Office of Policy Coordination (OPC). Wisner's boundless—almost maniacal—energy perfectly suited him to the task. Waller notes that the impetus for OPC's frenetic pace came from policymakers, including Kennan, looking for a third option to confront communism that went beyond diplomacy but did not involve full-scale war.

Wisner was certainly eager to launch operations against the Soviets, but he was sensible enough to

realize that he needed to organize OPC first. Kennan and others at State and the National Security Council would hear none of it, however, fearing that delay on the covert policy side would blunt the effectiveness of the Marshall Plan. Kennan reviewed Wisner's plans for covert operations in 1949 and 1950 and added to the list. Kennan's later insistence that he never intended OPC to cast such a wide net and that he deeply regretted the existence of OPC ("the worst mistake I ever made") is disingenuous to say the least in light of his contemporary marching orders to Wisner. His later misgivings notwithstanding, Kennan's de facto orders to intensify covert subversion of the Soviet bloc set the tone for OPC activity in the 1950s.[a]

Waller does an excellent job analyzing CIA's various covert activities in the late 1940s and early-to-mid 1950s. Wisner immersed himself in the minute details of each operation, working at a pace that would have broken just about anybody and that most likely exacerbated his genetic predisposition to bipolar disorder, or what was then called manic depression.

Waller skillfully describes the historical background and details of CIA's covert efforts to overthrow the governments in Albania (late 1940s), Iran (1953), and Guatemala (1954), well known operations that nonetheless remain poorly understood. Waller is mostly fair in his descriptions of the events, recognizing for example that it was internal opposition to Iran's mercurial Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh and not CIA machinations that played the decisive role in Mossadegh's removal. In his epilogue, however, he cannot resist repeating the canard that CIA overthrew the "democratic regime" in Iran. In fact, the shah exercised his constitutional prerogative to remove Mossadegh, who illegally refused to leave office.

The chapters that describe Wisner's mental breakdown, his temporarily successful convalescence at Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital in Maryland, the toll the disease took on his family, and Wisner's suicide in 1965, are movingly written and among the book's best. Waller writes of the support Wisner received from friends and colleagues at CIA, especially as his condition became impossible to ignore during the twin international crises in Hungary and Egypt in 1956. Waller received invaluable assistance from Wisner's children to fill out this part of the narrative, and even decades later it is clear the memories are bitter.

The book's flaws relate mainly to what it omits. Beginning in 1952, when OPC and the Office of Special Operations merged to form the Directorate of Plans, Wisner was in charge of traditional HUMINT as well as counterintelligence (CI), in addition to covert action. Waller is almost completely silent on CIA's HUMINT and CI efforts, ignoring for example CIA's recruitment and handling of GRU officer Pyotor Popov in 1953 and the appointment of James Angleton as CI chief in 1954. Insights into how Wisner approached operating behind the Iron Curtain or vetted agents would have filled out the narrative considerably.

Wisner's tour as CIA's chief of station in London was also far more eventful than Waller acknowledges. While Wisner was there, CIA passed leads from it's Polish source, Michael Goleniewski, that led to the identification of numerous Soviet spies operating in Britain, including MI6 officer George Blake. Wisner would have been intimately involved in joint efforts to run to ground Goleniewski's information, but the threadbare chapter on Wisner's time in London focuses instead on the return of his mental instability, which only reappeared nearly two years into his tour.

Despite these deficiencies, Waller's book remains an important contribution to the intelligence literature on CIA's formative years. Waller's prose is crisp and compelling, and the volume never bogs down despite its hefty 526 pages, plus index and endnotes. It is an achievement and a fitting tribute to its legendary subject. ■

a. US Army historian Thomas Boghardt addressed one product of this strategy in this journal: "Liberation: US Operations to Counter Soviet Occupation of Ukraine, 1949–1953," *Studies in Intelligence* 67, No. 3 (September 2023) [Classified U//FOUO]. See also Frank Costigliola, *Kennan: A Life Between Worlds* (Princeton University Press, 2023) and Benjamin Nathan's review of the book, "The Enigma of George Kennan," in *New York Review of Books*, April 24, 2025.