

# **Roosevelt's Secret War: FDR and World War II Espionage**

## ***Intelligence in Recent Public Literature***

By Joseph E. Persico. New York: Random House, 2001. 564 pages.

**Reviewed by John Ehrman**

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World War II may have ended fifty-seven years ago, but it still provides many timely lessons for both intelligence professionals and policymakers. The latest example of this may be found in Joseph Persico's *Roosevelt's Secret War*, a history of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's use of intelligence before and during America's involvement in the war.

Persico provides a straightforward narrative of how FDR viewed and used intelligence. As background, he notes that Roosevelt had long been fascinated by secrecy and intrigue and that, as Assistant Secretary of the Navy during World War I, he had worked to build up the Office of Naval Intelligence's capabilities. The main story, however, begins in 1938 as Roosevelt, awakening to the danger of war and fearing internal subversion, began paying more attention to gathering foreign intelligence. Without a professional intelligence service to turn to, FDR asked some of his wealthy—and globally connected—friends to undertake missions abroad, even as he tried vainly to get the FBI and military intelligence services to cooperate effectively. Persico describes the subsequent growth of the intelligence relationship with Britain, FDR's selection of William Donovan to undertake

liaison missions to London, US codebreaking successes against the Japanese, and Roosevelt's appointment of Donovan to head the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI), which evolved into the Office of Strategic Services (OSS).

Once past Pearl Harbor, Persico provides an overview of US wartime intelligence activities. He covers major operations, like Allen Dulles's mission to Switzerland; describes the continuing contributions of the codebreakers and the blind luck that kept the Germans and Japanese from realizing that the United States was reading their traffic; reviews the bitter infighting within the intelligence bureaucracy; and outlines the Soviet penetration of FDR's administration, the OSS, and the atomic bomb project. In passing, Persico also gives the OSS's analysts—many of whom went on to distinguished academic and government careers—credit for the accurate and informative reports they prepared.

Throughout, two personalities dominate the book. The first is Gen. Donovan, portrayed by Persico as a brilliant leader who created the OSS from scratch and recruited an enormous number of talented people to man it. Persico also describes Donovan's less successful sides. His incompetence as an administrator greatly reduced the OSS's effectiveness. He also was a man who continually generated hare-brained operational schemes—a few weeks after Pearl Harbor he proposed immediately invading Japan with 15,000 commandos and, later, suggested bombing enemy water supplies with human feces.

The second key personality, of course, is FDR. Persico details Roosevelt's boyish delight in espionage, which fit well with his penchant for secrecy and creating organizational rivalries, as well as his voracious consumption of human intelligence reporting. But Persico also notes that Roosevelt was a shrewd judge of character. FDR understood that Donovan was a valuable asset, but realized that most of the General's ideas were bad. Indeed, Persico notes that Roosevelt patiently listened to Donovan's suggestions, waiting for a good one to appear—and some did surface, such as a proposal to begin collecting German scientific journals—but never took him into his inner circle of strategic advisers.

None of what Persico relates is new or controversial. Historians and memoirists have been writing for decades about OSS operations, the wartime codebreaking, and other intelligence stories. Nor do Persico's portraits of Donovan and FDR break any new ground. Indeed, his notes show a heavy reliance on secondary sources and other long-available

material. The book also is padded and overly long—Persico at times wanders off onto extended tangents, although his fluid prose makes for an easy read. The main value of *Roosevelt's Secret War* is that it provides a good introduction and overview of the subject.

Already well-informed readers will find, however, that Persico touches on several issues worth further consideration, especially in light of the increased demands for intelligence support in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. The first is the question of how to organize intelligence on the fly. In 1938, the president was still able to run intelligence out of his pocket, use amateurs and friends, and focus on just a few critical problems. Just four years later, with the United States engaged on political, military, and economic fronts around the world, this was no longer the case; the complexity of the war and its planning meant that intelligence now had to be collected, analyzed, and distributed by a professional organization. For Roosevelt and Donovan, this meant defining and establishing an organization under fast-changing conditions. Their task was not unlike the task in which the United States finds itself now engaged, as the intelligence and law enforcement communities reorganize, both internally and in their relations with each other, to better handle the terrorist threat.

Franklin Roosevelt's love of manipulation, bureaucratic competition, and secrecy, plus Donovan's administrative incompetence, greatly increased the difficulty of building an effective intelligence system. Indeed, if left to their own devices, FDR and Donovan would have failed miserably. In early 1942, the Joint Chiefs of Staff sought to destroy the COI—as a civilian entity, it was a rival to the military intelligence organizations. Gen. Walter Bedell Smith, a regular Army officer and astute administrator, saw the potential value of the COI and suggested taking it into the military where it could be put to effective use.

Another striking lesson of *Roosevelt's Secret War* is that the greatest successes generally come not from glamorous acts of daring but, rather, from the slow, painstaking, and carefully planned work of professionals. It was decrypted enemy messages that were most prized by Army Chief of Staff George Marshall. Similarly, it was not until the second half of 1944, after years of research, planning, and training, that the OSS was able to insert agents directly into Germany. The lesson is plain: careful planning and the application of brainpower are the foundations of intelligence successes.

Persico also reminds us that many other problems we face today are not new. Roosevelt had an enormous appetite for raw intelligence reports, and Donovan responded by sending him a constant stream. Consequently, and like senior consumers ever since, FDR often served as his own analyst. During the war, the United States had to weigh the benefits of cracking down on neutral states, like Switzerland, that provided Germany with vital supplies against the costs of losing important intelligence outposts—business as usual, however repugnant, often was tolerated with an eye toward the greater goal. Missions and priorities also would change in sudden and unexpected ways and intelligence had to respond. The OSS was ordered to find and track German-controlled assets and financial flows, much as we now seek to track criminal and terrorist finances. Donovan's officers also had to decide whether or how to deal with questionable—or downright evil—agents and sources. All of this took place, moreover, against a backdrop of frequent leaks, both by FDR's political opponents as well as by the FBI, the military, and the OSS itself, as the intelligence services competed for influence and resources. This aspect of *Roosevelt's Secret War* may be depressingly familiar, but also shows that such problems, while making life hard, are a permanent fact of life in Washington.

*Roosevelt's Secret War* by no means will be the last word on World War II intelligence. Nonetheless, readers will gain a basic understanding of the events of sixty years ago and also take away some timeless lessons.

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