Wild Bill Donovan: The Spymaster Who Created the OSS and Modern American Espionage by Douglas Waller

Roosevelt's Masterspy

He was one of America’s most exciting and secretive generals—the man Franklin Roosevelt made his top spy in World War II. A mythic figure whose legacy is still intensely debated, “Wild Bill” Donovan was director of the Office of Strategic Services (the country’s first national intelligence agency) and the father of today’s CIA. Donovan introduced the nation to the dark arts of covert warfare on a scale it had never seen before. Now, veteran journalist Douglas Waller has mined government and private archives throughout the United States and England, drawn on thousands of pages of recently declassified documents, and interviewed scores of Donovan’s relatives, friends, and associates to produce a riveting biography of one of the most powerful men in modern espionage. William Joseph Donovan’s life was packed with personal drama. The son of poor Irish Catholic parents, he married into Protestant wealth and fought heroically in World War I, where he earned the nickname “Wild Bill” for his intense leadership and the Medal of Honor for his heroism. After the war he made millions as a Republican lawyer on Wall Street until FDR, a Democrat, tapped him to be his strategic intelligence chief. A charismatic leader, Donovan was revered by his secret agents. Yet at times he was reckless—risking his life unnecessarily in war zones, engaging in extramarital affairs that became fodder for his political enemies—and he endured heartbreaking tragedy when family members died at young ages. Wild Bill Donovan reads like an action-packed spy thriller, with stories of daring young men and women in his OSS sneaking behind enemy lines for sabotage, breaking into Washington embassies to steal secrets, plotting to topple Adolf Hitler, and suffering brutal torture or death when they were captured by the Gestapo. It is also a tale of political intrigue, of infighting at the highest levels of government, of powerful men pitted against one another. Donovan fought enemies at home as often as the Axis abroad.
Generals in the Pentagon plotted against him. J. Edgar Hoover had FBI agents dig up dirt on him. Donovan stole secrets from the Soviets before the dawn of the Cold War and had intense battles with Winston Churchill and British spy chiefs over foreign turf. Separating fact from fiction, Waller investigates the successes and the occasional spectacular failures of Donovan’s intelligence career. It makes for a gripping and revealing portrait of this most controversial spymaster.

My Personal Review:
The history of espionage and especially its role in history had been acknowledged long ago. Any respectable historian cannot afford to ignore this particular field of study because intelligence has indeed played a significant role in the process of policy making everywhere.
This point is relevant when one is interested to know more about the history of WWII and the Cold War. The release of ten of millions of declassified documents pertaining to intelligence matters has yielded a tremendous number of studies, monographs and histories on this fascinating angle of human history.
Some spies became legendary many years after their demise, but Bill Donovan was one of those whose name was famous already in his lifetime, creating the OSS—the Office of Strategic Services, after Roosevelt, who had been a political opponent of Donovan in the 1930s, approved Donovans original idea about establishing this service.
Donovan came from a poor Irish family but later married into wealth. His wife, Ruth, who was daughter of a very rich family in Buffalo, was a chronic depressive and Donovans frequent cheating on her hardly helped Ruth cope with her disease. Rumours said that he had even slept with his daughter-in-law, Mary, but soon this proved to be a blatant lie spread by the malicious tongues of Donovans opponents. Donovan had to fight bureaucrats from the army and the State Department all his life. His most severe foe was none other than another legendary figure, that of J. Edgar Hoover, the chief of the FBI, who accused Donovan of being soft on Communists.
Donovan was a hero of WW1 and was decorated for bravery on the battlefields of France. He was given his nickname Wild Bill by his men because he put them through grueling training for battle.
Having returned to New York, he started his career as a very successful lawyer and made a fortune on Wall Street. He was a Republican running for governor of New York in 1932, but was defeated.
Another man who found his services neccesary was Winston Churchill, but both men soured on each other as Donovans OSS and British Intelligence squabbled over which service controlled secret operations in overseas theaters.
Donovan was a charismatic leader and was much adored by his subordinates. He risked his life in many instances and dangerous zones. So did his thousands of agents, both men and women who sneaked behind enemy lines (during WW2) for sabotage, breaking into Washington embassies to steal secrets, plotting to kill Hitler, and suffering brutal torture.
This fascinating and brilliant book is action-filled on almost every page, with hundreds of episodes which constitute the corpus of Donovan's OSS history. Eager to be close to the action, Donovan went in on all major Allies landings, causing concern among famous American generals, because Donovan knew much and if captured by the enemy, he would become a valuable prize.

China was only one of the countries in which he was allowed to operate and it took more than two years of haggling with the Nationalists before he was able to launch his guerrilla attacks against the Japanese. Another famous superspy who would lead the CIA was Allen Dulles, who was the head of the OSS station in Bern. Donovan considered him a poor administrator and was extremely disappointed after Dulles was assigned to lead the CIA.

There were also intelligence failures. Italy was one example in which there were three main operation programs led by clumsy and amateurish people. The political intelligence the OSS outposts in Palermo and Naples gathered was worthless and money was being wasted. Some OSS officers were even pocketing cash on the side.

Another country where Donovan was cleaning house was Turkey, after the Pentagon complained about the poor intelligence quality coming out of Turkey.

Donovan made some visits to the pope and Pius made it clear that he was pulling for Roosevelt's reelection. As Mr. Waller puts it, the Catholic Church had become a trusted and valuable ally in the secret war against the Nazis. The efforts to gain intelligence and to perpetrate acts of sabotage against the Nazis led Donovan to step up the infiltration of agents into Germany, a process led by another famous Cold Warrior, William Casey. This process had mixed results. Some operatives rescued war prisoners and others penetrated Gestapo organizations in Munich and Berlin while others identified local Nazi chiefs for American soldiers.

After WW2, President Truman, who knew that he needed a secret intelligence service, closed the OSS and was against giving a new job to Donovan. But he did create the CIA in 1947, modeled on Donovan's proposal for a postwar intelligence service. It was president Eisenhower who gave Donovan, who became a staunch anticommunist after the war, the job at the USA ambassador to Thailand. This was a consolation prize offered to Donovan, because Hoover was much responsible for denying Donovan the CIA job.

Donovan's life came to an end in a sad way and he died after his seventieth birthday. In his life he endured some tragedies after some of his family members died tragically. Hoover, who considered Donovan's agents as amateurs, spread the false rumour that Donovan died of syphilis.

Bill Casey, who led the OSS operations in Germany, commissioned a bronze statue of Donovan at the quarters of the CIA.

This book is a superb achievement, mainly due to the extremely good command of perhaps thousands of sources both written and oral. Mr. Waller has finally managed to separate truth from fiction, fact from fantasy. Friends, relatives, specialists - all were interviewed or consulted, verifying each fact or statement.
But there is another point which makes this book such a joy to read: Mr. Waller's ability to simplify and tell the history of the OSS and Donovan's successes and failures in a very quick-paced and thriller-like style of writing. His impressive research and command of sources as well as his lively style of writing make this book mandatory for anyone who wants to learn about the history of the American intelligence operations during and after WW2.

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