

Intelligence in Public Media

OSS Operation Black Mail: One Woman's Covert War Against the Imperial Japanese Army

Ann Todd (Naval Institute Press, 2017), 244 pp., photographs.

Reviewed by J. R. Seeger

Over the last decade, American researchers have uncovered amazing stories of heroism from declassified archival material of the “glorious amateurs” of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Books and articles on the OSS have encompassed stories of courage in the face of grave danger behind the lines in both the European theatre of Operations (ETO) and the China, Burma, India (CBI) theatre, and tales of the importance of OSS strategic analysis by some of the greatest academic minds in the United States. In *OSS Operation Black Mail*, Ann Todd provides the reader with an integrated discussion of the strategic role of the OSS in Asia, the tactical missions of the various units of OSS assigned to CBI, and the personal insights of one of the most important OSS and CIA officers, Elizabeth P. McIntosh. Any one of these aspects would make this book recommended reading for intelligence professionals; by combining all three, though, Todd has created a book that should be required reading for anyone interested in the Allied war against Japan, US intelligence operations in the 1940s, and the critical role of women in the OSS and the US intelligence community.

Discussion of OSS operations in World War II often focuses on Secret Intelligence (OSS/SI) intelligence collection operations, Special Operations (OSS/SO) work behind enemy lines to support and create resistance forces fighting the Axis, and the role of Research and Analysis (OSS/R&A) in providing strategic intelligence to the president and the Joint Chiefs.^a But neither the intricacy of OSS/SI and OSS/SO nor the strategic focus of OSS/R&A completely addressed what OSS commander general William Donovan considered one of the organization's primary missions: “morale operations” or “psychological warfare.” Interestingly, the OSS programs focused on psychological operations against the Axis powers

(under the title “Morale Operations” (OSS/MO)) are rarely explored in the available literature—except indirectly, in more general discussions of either OSS as a whole or strategic discussions of Allied “deception operations.”^b The War Report of the OSS^c states:

“Black” propaganda was always an essential part of Donovan’s program for psychological warfare. “Persuasion, penetration, and intimidation,” Donovan felt, “are the modern counterpart of sapping and mining in the siege warfare of former days.”

Todd captures, in one simple phrase, the mission of OSS/MO:

“. . . planting a virus of doubt and desolation that could then reverse-infect the soldiers, creating a circle of despair.” (47–48)

In both the post-war report and Todd's book, the role of “black” propaganda is defined as propaganda that must appear to be coming from among the enemy troops or originating in the Axis homelands. This was in contrast to “white” propaganda, which was associated with the US Office of War Information (OWI) and other propaganda organizations within the US Army. In Todd's estimation, it was this distinction that allowed the OSS to claim manpower resources from the US military—even when the head of Army intelligence, Maj. Gen. George V. Strong, did everything in his power to block OSS access to US Army resources.

Donovan persuaded the president to sign a new executive order defining OWI’s propagandistic functions as strictly white and overt, which left the need for black, or covert, propaganda. JCS 155/2/D officially

a. There are extensive lists of books that discuss these three aspects of the OSS, a sampling of which includes Thomas W. Lippman, *Arabian Knight* (Selwa Press, 2008); Judith Pearson, *The Wolves at the Door* (The Lyons Press, 2008); Susan Allen, *Classical Spies* (University of Michigan Press, 2011); and Troy Sacquety, *The OSS in Burma* (University Press of Kansas, 2013).

b. The exception is Clayton Laurie's book *The Propaganda Warriors: America's Crusade against Nazi Germany* (University Press of Kansas, 1996).

c. United States War Department Strategic Services Unit, *War Report of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services)* (Walker & Co., 1976), 211.

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made OSS the military's psychological warfare agency, which meant Donovan would be supplied with military manpower for his otherwise-civilian agency. (3–4)

This was one of many brilliant moves on Donovan's part to neutralize his adversaries in Washington. Todd points out that by the time the United States was in the war, the British had already established both the Special Operations Executive (SOE), to support resistance operations in the European and Asian theatres, and the Political Warfare Executive (PWE), focused on conducting black propaganda operations in both theatres. SOE and PWE were "outsider" organizations created by the Churchill government; both were accustomed to hostility from established organizations—especially from the British military—and knew they could expect the same degree of hostility from the US establishment.^a The PWE was a "black" propaganda organization, interested in working with neither the US Office of War Information nor the US military, then focused exclusively on "white" propaganda.

By establishing OSS's claim to black propaganda, as well as to resistance operations and strategic intelligence collection, Donovan linked his new organization to powerful allies in the United Kingdom: the Secret Intelligence Service, the SOE, and the PWE. All three British organizations had direct ties to British Prime Minister Churchill and, regardless of what internal rivalries might exist inside the US military and civilian security services, this would mean that Donovan would receive strong allied support when he went to the White House.

As Todd's narrative follows Elizabeth McIntosh through her OSS training and to assignments in Washington and on into the CBI theatre, we begin to see the role of OSS/MO and the challenges faced especially by the team responsible for black propaganda against the Japanese Imperial Army. The "Asia hands" in the academic world, State Department and the US military were convinced that Japanese troops were impervious to any type of propaganda—white or black. They saw the Imperial

Japanese Army as a monolithic force in which duty and loyalty to the emperor were the single motivating factors.

The first order of business for McIntosh and her colleagues was to first reject this ethnocentric view of the Japanese and, once rejected, address how to best attack the morale of individual soldiers. From a professional intelligence officer standpoint, Todd's description of the tactics, techniques, and procedures that McIntosh and others used offers a useful guide on how to analyze a target audience and then develop messages designed to resonate with specific individuals or groups of individuals. Among the many factors that remain applicable today is Todd's description of how the OSS/MO elements in India worked with the OSS/SO elements in Burma (Detachment 101) to acquire material, deliver "payload" (false messages), and, in rare cases, measure effectiveness in the field. That partnership between what we would call today "special operations" and "covert influence" explains to a great degree the success that OSS/MO had in the CBI. Simple truisms such as this can continue to serve as mottos for future covert influence practitioners:

The key to black propaganda . . . is to do as much truth as possible, and just bend it a little at the end. Just put a little hook on it. (149)

But Todd's book is also about the people of OSS/MO, and specifically about Elizabeth McIntosh. McIntosh started as a junior member of OSS/MO and ended the war 18 months later as the OSS/MO chief for the entire CBI theatre. Todd was able to interview McIntosh several times during the course of writing the book, and the latter's roller coaster of emotions around the war and the characters involved comes through loud and clear. There are few books that cover the same ground in Asia, and very few that offer the insight Todd provides on how it feels to work to erode enemy morale as part of a larger war zone effort. (Two other books do come close to providing a sense of what this experience was like: Charles Fenn's autobiographical *At the Dragon's Gate: With the OSS in the Far East* (Naval Institute Press, 2004) and a more recent biography by Jennet Conant entitled *A Covert Affair: Julia Child and Paul Child in the OSS* (Simon & Schuster, 2011). All three works describe a team of eccentrics living in an especially eccentric world of the Far East, fighting what can only be described as a battle for the minds of the Japanese Imperial Army.

a. For additional detail on both the SOE and the PWE and their adversarial relationships with the British military establishment, see Giles Milton, *The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare: Churchill's Mavericks—Plotting Hitler's Defeat* (Picador, 2017) and David Garnett, *The Secret History of PWE: The Political Warfare Executive, 1939–1945* (Little, Brown, 2002).

MO brought a wave of artists, journalists, and others who were deeply familiar with the languages and cultures of far-flung parts of the globe. These were creative types, professionals—many too old to enlist—eager to join the war, “over there.” Each of the scholars, writers, and artists destined for Asia had, through his or her own life’s work, sought to understand the cultures of that part of the world; now, that understanding would be put to use finding weaknesses, attacking unity, and, as one scholar put it, “to crack the enemy’s culture up, not just crack it open.” (xii)

The book closes with the sad tale of the end of the OSS and, worse, the FBI investigations of multiple OSS personnel, suspected of being communists, who were close friends of McIntosh—including that of one of her closest friends, Jane Foster. The post-war investigation is the focus of the last two chapters of the book and tells the tale of what had to appear as FBI’s effort to destroy the OSS legacy.

For those interested in more about the effects of the investigations of the CBI team, Conant’s book addresses what this period was like for Julia Child and husband,

Paul, in chapters titled “Open Season” and “The Nightmare.” Todd makes clear that McIntosh was hurt by the investigations but unlike her OSS peers, the Childs, Charles Fenn, and Jane Foster, she accepted an invitation from Allen Dulles to join the CIA in 1958 and served with distinction until 1985. After her years as a CIA officer, McIntosh worked for many years as an annuitant and historian for the Agency and authored the 1998 book *Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS* (Naval Institute Press).

McIntosh died in 2015 at the age of 100. While it is unlikely that her CIA adventures will be declassified for some years to come, Todd’s book makes clear that Elizabeth McIntosh was an intelligence officer of keen insight and courage whose legacy remains part of the DNA of the modern CIA. Todd’s book offers the reader excellent detail on both McIntosh, the OSS, and the structure of OSS “black propaganda” in the CBI theatre during World War II. Every page is filled with information that practitioners of the espionage trade, historians of World War II, and the common reader will want to read and re-read.



