

“Making Trouble for Joe Stalin in His Own Backyard”

Johanna Granville

Copyright: Johanna Granville, review of Peter Grose, *Operation Rollback: America's Secret War Behind the Iron Curtain* (2000), published as H-NET Book Review, H-DIPLO@h-net.msu.edu (September 8, 2000)

In his latest book, *Operation Rollback: America's Secret War Behind the Iron Curtain*, Peter Grose recounts the genesis and demise of U.S. counterforce policies in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He is also the author of *Gentleman Spy: The Life of Allen Dulles*, a former diplomatic correspondent for the *New York Times*, and executive editor of *Foreign Affairs*.

Although the book ostensibly covers both the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations up to 1956, it focuses primarily on the 1940s. Grose apparently argues that President Truman had been implementing covert operations behind the Iron Curtain long before the terms “rollback” and “liberation” came into vogue under Eisenhower and the Republicans (pp 193-195). In a dilemma somewhat similar to Richard Nixon's in his television debates with John F. Kennedy in 1960, Truman Administration officials could not adequately defend themselves when accused by the Republicans in the 1952 election campaign of being too soft on communism in advocating “mere” containment. To do so would mean revealing classified information.

In fact, Grose explains, George Kennan himself—the scholarly diplomat and author of the “Long Telegram” in 1946—was one of the very first officials to advocate hiring East European and Russian emigres to do dangerous subversive work from behind the Iron Curtain. This is particularly surprising when one recalls how Kennan publicly lamented the fact that his Long Telegram (subsequently the “X article” in *Foreign Affairs*) was later “militarized” by Paul Nitze and others in the NSC 68 document establishing U.S. Containment policy.

A clandestine organization (the “Office of Policy Coordination,” or OPC) was authorized by National Security Directive 10/2 on June 18, 1948 (p. 104). The OPC's purpose was to direct a wide range of subversive and outright paramilitary operations, including “guerrilla units, sabotage forces, ...and localized rebellions behind the Iron Curtain.” (p. 98). The OPC was sandwiched between the CIA and State, providing high-level Executive Branch officials plausible deniability. Grose quotes from an uncensored text of one of Kennan's internal memoranda:

“In contrast to CIA operations, involving the American government directly with underground activities, this project would [involve]...deeply concealed official control of clandestine operations so that governmental control cannot be shown. General direction and financial support would come from the Government; guidance and funds would pass to a private American organization...composed of private citizens.....; these organizations through their field offices in Europe and Asia, would establish contact with the various national underground representatives in free countries and through these intermediaries pass on ...guidance to the resistance movements behind the iron curtain.” [1]

To head the organization, Kennan sought out experienced individuals in government, law, and intelligence, such as Allen Dulles, Matthias Correa, and Irving Brown, but all of them declined the post. Finally, on August 19, 1948, Frank Wisner, a former OSS agent in Romania, lawyer by training, and enthusiastic advocate of Rollback, was appointed (p. 110).

Grose provides detailed profiles of some of the individuals active in the OPC. For example, Carmel Offie (“Offlet”) served as an indispensable recruiter of East European agents and a discrete “fixer” of problems too unsavory for other officials. Frank Lindsay parachuted several times into the Ukraine, but eventually left government in disillusionment. Michael Josselson headed the Congress of Cultural Freedom, a left-wing forum, for decades. A polyglot, he was the “quintessential undercover operative” (p. 139). Other individuals discussed include Melvin Lasky, Isaac Don Levine, and Whittaker Chambers.

When the Korean War broke out, General Roscoe K. Hillenkoetter took a command post in the Pacific and General William Bedell Smith became the new director of the CIA. He decided in August 1952 to abolish the OPC and incorporate it into the CIA’s Directorate of Plans, the head of which remained Frank Wisner.

Grose goes on to explain the successes and failures of the U.S. political warfare program, and the OPC in particular. The biggest successes include the dispatch of U.S. food supplies during the 1953 East Berlin uprising, and the establishment of institutions such as Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, and the Congress for Cultural Freedom (p. 213, 215).

As Grose points out, these psychological warfare projects began to look more promising to U.S. policymakers in the light of repeated paramilitary failures. One of the first test cases for Rollback was Albania. Beginning in November 1948, U.S. intelligence officials, collaborating closely with Great Britain’s secret “Russia Committee,” planned to send saboteurs and resistance agents into Albania by boat. The men tried to “recruit villagers they encountered in the wilds, skirmished with communist security units who just happened to be on the scene, and eventually turned back to their escape routes.” Four of the infiltration agents were killed, and a fifth disappeared without a trace. (158-9) As one American case officer, Robert Low, gloomily surmised in retrospect, “there was a leak somewhere....The communists just knew too much about these people we were sending in.” (159).

U.S. intelligence planners again tried to implement Rollback in the Ukraine. In September 1949 “unmarked C-47s dropped groups of two or three Ukrainian scouts near major Soviet airfields.” (p. 171). Once again, the agents disappeared without a trace. Other Rollback

failures include Soviet Moldova (August 1951) and the Hungarian-Romanian district of Faragas (October 1951). (p. 173)

One of the worst failures of Rollback, Grose says, concerned the Polish underground movement, “Wolnosc i Niezawistosc” (Freedom and Independence, or WIN) (p. 176). In February 1949 U.S. intelligence officials began to finance the WIN network [1] Most of them strongly believed that the Soviet Union planned to launch an offensive toward Western Europe and that the most direct route was through the Polish heartland; hence the urgent need for an early warning system and pro-Western underground network in Poland. For three years the CIA funneled large amounts of Marshall Plan aid to WIN, only to discover that one of the top WIN leaders in Poland, Sienko, had long ago been turned into a double agent by Soviet security officials (p.178-179). [2]

To be sure, many of these failures can be blamed on the Soviet mole, Harold (“Kim”) Philby, whose position as liaison between the British and American embassies enabled him to do twice as much damage. Yet, as Grose reveals, Philby had not known about other U.S. covert operations in the Baltic States, which nevertheless also failed (p.163).

Perhaps the root of these failures of Rollback was the fundamental naivete of American planners. They were too trusting, and thus vulnerable to Soviet moles like Sienko and Philby. This vulnerability in fact led to many deaths in the early post World War Two period, as illustrated by the transfer by U.S. and Allied officials of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war to Stalin, where they were executed or sentenced to life imprisonment (p. 20-21)

Aided by experts on the USSR like Averell Harriman and Charles Bohlen, Truman was, in some ways more realistic about the Soviet Union than his predecessor, FDR. It was his administration that approved NSC Directive 10/2, which made the OPC possible. (p. 104) It was also the Truman Administration, specifically the National Security Council and officials in the State Department (e.g. George Kennan) and CIA (Frank Wisner), that first began thinking about the possibility of recruiting young, single East European men to fight for the U.S. Army.

To the embarrassment of the Truman Administration, Henry Cabot Lodge, the Republican Senator of Massachusetts, introduced a bill in the spring before the 1948 election to recruit up to fifty thousand single European men from the DP camps into the US Army and to train them (the “Volunteer Freedom Corps,” or VFC) in paramilitary and espionage skills for future deployment behind the Iron Curtain. (p. 202). Later a congressman from Wisconsin, Charles Kersten, publicly proposed in the summer of 1951 to allocate 100 million of U.S. military aid “for any selected persons who are residing in or escapees” from the lands behind the Iron Curtain. “We have the opportunity of taking the offensive in the Cold War, Kersten declared. “Let us make some trouble for Joe Stalin in his own backyard!” (p. 204). As Grose points out, Frank Wisner and others feared these developments would jeopardize the actions the OPC was already taking.

Yet, while President Truman may have been more realistic about the Soviet Union, his bulldog-like confrontations with the Russians—like his famous retort to Mikoyan in April 1945—had the effect of only convincing Stalin and the other Soviet leaders that Truman was an intellectual lightweight. As a result, the Kremlin leaders seized the opportunity to exploit the ample propaganda material presented them in the public proposals by Congressional leaders like Lodge and Kersten to recruit East Europeans for the U.S. Army.

The innate naivete of OPC officials is also reflected in their assumption that, given adequate financial backing, all the emigres (“displaced persons”) from the Soviet Union and East Europe could be mobilized against communism. As Grose explains, they failed to fully grasp the deep-seated nationalist and irredentist antagonisms that predated the Nazi terror, Stalinist purges, and even the Bolshevik Revolution. Romanians and Hungarians, Poles and Lithuanians, Czechs and Slovaks, Russians with the non-Russian national groups, and post-1917 Soviet emigres with post-1945 Soviet emigres—all quarreled with each other (p. 127-8). Without U.S. financial support, this troubled tapestry might have quickly unravelled.

Furthermore, despite Truman’s greater realism about Soviet intentions (as opposed to that of Franklin Roosevelt), his Administration may not have fully grasped the ruthlessness and suspiciousness of the Soviet leadership. The contrast between U.S. and Soviet Cold War policies is illustrated by the fundamentally opposite ways in which each country treated its respective author of the “long telegram.” Whereas George Kennan’s telegram was published in *Foreign Affairs* and was reiterated in the NSC-68 document (the articulation of U.S. Containment policy), the telegram of Nikolai Novikov—the Soviet ambassador to the United States—was locked up by Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov. No one saw it—not even Stalin himself, apparently—until Soviet historians produced it at an academic conference in the summer of 1990. Novikov reported “a decline in the influence on foreign policy of those who follow Roosevelt’s course for cooperation among peace-loving countries.” (p.90).

For all U.S. security precautions in the late 1940s, Stalin quickly found out about U.S. espionage activities. Grose gives at least two examples. First, a “Polish anticommunist activist who had managed to smuggle himself out of Warsaw in the uniform of an American officer.” In another case pro-Soviet police forces in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia caught some anticommunist partisans making radio contact with British intelligence (p. 80).

After Stalin’s death on March 5, 1953, a rift developed within U.S. policymaking circles between those who believed that this destabilizing event presented an even greater opportunity to foment revolt within the USSR via the VFC, and those who believed that the post-Stalinist leadership was genuinely interested in coexisting with the Western democracies. At a National Security Council meeting of February 19, 1953, under the new President, Dwight Eisenhower, the VFC plan was again debated. Grose states that the VFC was authorized in May 1953, but the Republican Administration continued to delay its implementation (p. 212).[4]

What Grose does not point out is the tight connection between the Kersten Amendment and the VFC proposal, and of the importance of selling the idea to the European allies. In a

thoughtful memorandum of April 13, 1953, Charles B. Marshall, a high-level State Department official on the NSC Ad Hoc Committee, wrote to General Willis D. ("Crit") Crittenger: "It is necessary only to recall the passing predicament in which the United States was placed at the time of the Soviet and satellite attacks of last year in the General Assembly growing out of the Kersten Amendment—a predicament owing largely to the circumstance that, because of the precipitate timing of the Kersten Amendment, the U.S. Government was left without opportunity to bring its friends into line in support of its position in advance of the attacks made by adversaries.....A point of caution is relevant to any attempt to get ahead with the [VFC] project in the interim by using funds available under the Kersten Amendment." [5]

Thus, a serious attempt was made to get the European Allies to agree to the VFC. General Crittenger was sent to London, Paris, and Bonn in March 1954. [6] The French objected the most strongly to the VFC on the grounds that a) it would have little military efficacy; 2) would be of dubious value as instrument of psychological warfare; 3) would give USSR ammunition for psychological warfare against the U.S., portraying US as war-mongering; and 4) it would generally be a very provocative step that might lead to all-out war [7]

Moreover, the French objected to the VFC strongly because their earlier experiences with the Polish General Wladislaw Anders, who earlier fought alongside the Red Army in resistance to Nazi rule, then had turned against the Soviets. Anders escaped with cadres intact and fought under General Eisenhower in the invasion of North Africa and Italy (p. 176). according to a 1953 telegram declassified in 1998, "For several years the Polish General Anders had been trying to persuade the French military and political leaders about his concept of a 'Freedom Corps,' composed of Polish units to be organized in the West. The French have never viewed Ander's concept favorably. [8]

As Grose points out, one steadfast advocate of the VFC even after Stalin's death was C. D. Jackson, who headed Eisenhower's Psychological Strategy Board and "yielded to no one in his militancy for liberation." (p. 212). He wrote to "Crit" in March 1954: "After listening to Mr. Molotov for one month in Berlin, there [is no doubt that] he can neither be appeased nor provoked. Furthermore, he stated as a flat fact during one of the sessions that our present labor battalions were a militarily trained and equipped paramilitary police force...[W]ith only mild sarcasm, if VFC were to come into being, it would save Mr. Molotov from being a liar." [9]

In short, Operation Rollback has many merits and is worth reading. However, every book has its strengths and weaknesses, and Grose's book is no exception. A serious scholar will find the book a bit dissatisfying for several reasons. First, it lacks a straightforward Introduction informing the reader of the book's purpose and key arguments. Consequently, the author skips around topically, geographically, and chronologically. Instead of a Preface or Introduction, the book opens with an "Overture" about George Kennan ("the vexing 'Mr. X'"), and then drops the theme until Chapter Five ("Kennan's Design"). In addition, Grose provides a plethora of names and facts, which may constitute "new information," and yet,

without providing any overall conceptual framework, the reader is often left wondering “So what?”

Secondly, despite the energetic promotion of this book by Houghton Mifflin, not all the information here is new. Many of the anecdotes have been covered in earlier memoirs and scholarly histories of US intelligence in the early Cold War period. Three examples are 1) Harry Truman’s acerbic interchange with Vyacheslav Molotov on April 23, 1945; 2) Allen Dulles’s decision to leak the full text of Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” to the New York Times in June 1956; and 3) the story of Frank Wisner’s mental breakdown and suicide. At the same time, the book skims lightly over key events of the 1950s such as the Hungarian Revolution, but omits entirely the Poznan riot (quite possibly influenced in part by the New York Times’ publication of Khrushchev’s speech) and the “Polish October” of 1956.

Thirdly, although the book jacket claims that this book is “full of fresh diggings from archival ...sources,” it should be pointed out that Grose draws almost exclusively from the CIA’s own documentary collections published in the early 1990s, as well as from the FRUS series. The reader will also find it somewhat difficult to locate Grose’s sources. They are collected at the very back of the book according to chapter, and the author’s abbreviations for his main sources are given on a separate page. Thus, one needs to flip back and forth between the main text, the endnote corresponding to the chapter, and then the corresponding abbreviation.

Nevertheless, a key strength of this book is Grose’s own interviews with several OSS, OPC, and CIA agents (John Bross, Abbott Washburn, James McCargar), officials in the State Department (John Foster Leich), and members of East European resistance movements (Gleb Rahr), and other knowledgeable individuals (Melvin Lasky).

The book will be useful to scholars of U.S. intelligence and might also be useful for university students if used in conjunction with another, more straightforward and chronological account of U.S. intelligence activities in the 1940s. Grose writes engagingly, which may hold the attention of many, if not most, undergraduate students.

Bibliography

- [1]. An abridged form of this document can be found in C. Thomas Thorne, Jr. and David S. Patterson, eds. *Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996). Unfortunately, Grose does not provide the complete citation for the uncensored memorandum.
- [2]. The Polish name of this organization is given incorrectly in the book as “Wolnosc i Niepodleglosc.” This underground organization, which had about 30,000 members in 1945, was formed as early as September 1945, and initially remained independent from the Polish government in exile. (General Komorowski of the exile government actually ordered the organization to dissolve). WiN took over most of the staff and organization structures of the Delegatura Sił Zbrojnych na Kraj, or DSZ [Country Representation of the Armed Forces] after its dissolution. Initiated by Polish Colonel J. Rzepecki (“Prezes”), WiN was an attempt

to turn an underground military organization into a civilian socio-political movement. The WiN network was one among several other underground Polish resistance movements, the NZW [Narodowe Zjednoczenie Wojskowe], and the KWP [Konspiracyjne Wojsko Polskie], among others. The Polish Ministry of Public Security, or MBP [Ministerstwo Bespieczenstwa Publicznego] fought WiN by every possible means: military, terror, and propaganda. The arrested members of the General Staff were sentenced in ostentatious group trials. In 1948 the Polish Ministry of Public Security, after destroying the WiN leadership, took control of the organization, created a fictional General Staff (the leader of which was named "Kos"), which remained in contact with the WiN representation in Great Britain. The General Staff ceased operating in December 1952.

[3]. According to Jozef Czaplicki (alias "Bogdan"), chief of the MBP's Third Department, the MBP's use of double agents began in 1948, even before the American OPC began funding it, and there were a number of double agents involved, even before Sienko, including Adam Boryczko (alias "Tonko"), Maciolek, and "Kos" (the fake leader of the Fifth General Staff of WiN)). In his letter of November 15, 1948, Kos urged Maciolek, to establish closer ties with U.S. intelligence. In December 1949 Maciolek, accompanied by Sienko, went to Washington DC where he spoke with Arthur Bliss Lane (former U.S. Ambassador to Poland) and other representatives of the Department of Defense, CIA, and the Free Europe Committee. According to a recent book published in Warsaw, the Polish double agent Tychota learned in September 1952 that the Americans were "discouraged from further cooperation with WiN and decided to end it. " The double agents believed that American intelligence "already knew to what extent its network had been penetrated by the Polish intelligence and knew about the arrests being prepared." This is why the MBP went public with the information that the Fifth General Staff of WiN was fictional. See Zygmunt Woznicka, *Trzecia Wojna Światowa: w Oczekiwaniach w Kraju w latach 1944—1953* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1999), pp. 259-260, 266.

[4]. The VFC scheme was actually approved by the National Security Council as NSC 143/2 on the basis of recommendations by General Willis D. Crittenger, who was sent on a fact-finding mission to the European capitals. See Draft of Letter from C. D. Jackson to General Crittenger, re: Volunteer Freedom Corps, 3 pages. Eisenhower Presidential Library, C.D. Jackson Records, 1953-54, Box 6, Correspondence re: Volunteer Freedom Corps.

[5]. See Memorandum on April 13, 1953 from Charles B. Marshall, Dept. of State member, NSC Ad Hoc Committee, to Lt. Gen. Willis D Crittenger, Chairman, NSC Ad Hoc Committee, re: Department of State Comments on Volunteer Freedom Corps, 21 pp. Eisenhower Presidential Library, C D Jackson Records, 1953-1954, Box 6, Correspondence re: VFC. This memorandum and others cited below were declassified on July 23, 1998.

[6] See Memorandum on March 1, 1954, from C.D. Jackson to Robert Cutler re: Volunteer Freedom Corps, 2 pages. Eisenhower Presidential Library, C.D. Jackson Records, 1953-54, Box 6, Correspondence re: Volunteer Freedom Corps.

[7]. See Draft of Letter from President Dwight Eisenhower to Lt. General Willis Crittenberger on November 20, 1953, re: Volunteer Freedom Corps, 2 pages. Eisenhower Presidential Library, C.D. Jackson Records, 1953-54, Box 6, Correspondence re: Volunteer Freedom Corps. Declassified on July 23, 1998.

[8] See Telegram of July 11, 1953 from "Achilles" in Paris to U.S. Secretary of State re: Volunteer Freedom Corps, 2 pages. Eisenhower Presidential Library, C.D. Jackson Records, 1953-54, Box 6, Correspondence re: Volunteer Freedom Corps. Declassified on July 23, 1998.

[9]. Letter from C.D. Jackson to Lieutenant General Willis D. Crittenberger on March 15, 1954 re: Volunteer Freedom Corps, Eisenhower Presidential Library, C.D. Jackson Records, 1953-54, Box 6, Correspondence re: Volunteer Freedom Corps, 3 pages.