

Allen Dulles Under the Harsh Light of History

OPERATION SUNRISE: The Secret Surrender. By Bradley F. Smith and Elena Agarossi. Basic Books. 234 pages. \$11.95

By JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

ON MARCH 8, 1945, just two months before the end of the war, Allen Dulles, then head of the OSS office in Bern, Switzerland, met in Zurich with *Obergruppenfuhrer* Karl Wolff, higher SS and police leader (effectively the head of the SS) in Italy. Previously Wolff had been chief of Himmler's personal staff and thereafter his liaison officer at Hitler's headquarters. He was not a passive figure in the machine; in 1942, he had written a senior colleague in Berlin to express "his special joy that now five thousand of the Chosen People are going to Treblinka every day." Wolff's purpose in seeking the meeting, for which there had been preliminary soundings, was to propose a separate peace for the German forces and those of the Salo (Mussolini) Republic fighting in Italy.

The details of Wolff's proposal were exceptionally vague for reasons I will mention in a moment. His motivation was the hope, nearly universal among the Nazis at the time, that Britain and the United States would be receptive to any development that would allow the Germans to help in halting the movement of the Red Army into Europe. And he perhaps saw that even the effort and any ensuing negotiations would cause trouble between the Russians and the West. On this, were he that clear-headed, he was not mistaken. Allen Dulles was enthusiastic about the prospect and described Wolff as a "distinctive" and "dynamic" personality.

Cautious negotiations were authorized by Washington and Whitehall, and Stalin was furiously aroused. But FDR, as almost the last act of his life, managed, with the assistance of General Marshall and Admiral Leahy and some erratic help from Churchill, to assure Stalin that the unconditional surrender formula still held and, specifically, that there was no danger that German divisions would be released from Italy to fight the Russians. And presently, the negotiations having got nowhere, Dulles was told to break them off. Still greatly optimistic, he continued some unauthorized and clandestine efforts. These too had no practical result. The end did come a few days earlier in Italy than in the West but only after the German army had almost totally collapsed and, signifi-

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ALLEN DULLES (left) AND KARL WOLFF

cantly, word had come to the German generals of Hitler's death.

The publicity over the episode, to which Dulles himself contributed liberally, helped establish his reputation as a master of the clandestine arts. It also helped, along with the influence of John Foster Dulles, to make him head of the CIA.

One small school of historians has seen in Dulles' negotiations a perceptive view of the troubles the Russians would eventually cause in Europe. So he got started early on stopping them. Another school has seen him as the equally shrewd provocateur of the antagonisms that unnecessarily would lead to the Cold War. In either view, Dulles emerged as quite a fellow.

There is an inconsistency here between both these theories and subsequent history. In the space of a few months in 1959 and 1960, Dulles, as head of the CIA, showed himself to be a master of disastrous ineptitude. In those months he sent Gary Powers over the Paris Summit, helped overthrow the neutralist government of Souvanna Phouma in Laos (which later had to be restored) and was the man in charge of the organization that was responsible for perhaps the greatest foul-up in our history, the Bay of Pigs. After being sacked, he got E. Howard Hunt, a prominent Bay of Pigs operative, to help him write a book on how clandestine operations should be conducted. These were not the achievements of a shrewd or even a halfway intelligent administrator. Nor was shrewdness the quality remarked upon by those of us without organizational loyalty who knew him in those years. While such judgments should be offered (and received) with caution, by some, certainly, he was thought amiable, agreeable but mentally very, very dim. Perhaps in the most charitable view, he had passed his best by the time of his great fiascos.

Bradley F. Smith and Elena Agarossi, the two authors

of *Operation Sunrise*, show beyond doubt that he had not only passed his best but that his best had never been. Never, not even at the Bay of Pigs, was his capacity for detached misjudgment more disastrous than in his management of Operation Sunrise, as the Wolff negotiations were called. And the authors suggest that he committed himself to these foolish negotiations because, for his previous years in Bern, he had very little to show. He wanted to go out with a bang. Those who have thought he was foreseeing the Cold War and those who thought he was helping to cause it were both wrong. He was just being Allen Dulles.

Smith, a history teacher at Cabrillo College, Agarossi, a history teacher at the University of Pisa, have done a thorough job with the documents, papers and interrogations, most of which are now available, as well as with the mountain of secondary material. And, in a low-key manner, they tell an extraordinarily good and effective story. On the dust jacket, John Toland, describing the book as the "fullest and most accurate account" of the episode, goes on to say that it has material for "at least one Eric Ambler" novel. I would be content to say that it is a very competent, very careful and very readable example of the good historical monograph.

The difficulty with the negotiations, the flaw that escaped Dulles, was that Wolff had nothing whatever to surrender. The surrender could only be by Kesselring and the high Wehrmacht officers, and they had no time at all for Wolff. (When Heinrich Vietinghoff, who briefly replaced Kesselring in Italy toward the end, was thought to be listening to Wolff, he was promptly suspended from duty.) The generals did not wish to be responsible, as they had been after World War I, for a stab-in-the-back legend, and even more specifically for any action that could easily cost a man his neck. So they held out until the Allies reached the Alps. Wolff's offer of surrender was from a world of fantasy in which, alone, he was omnipotent. Dulles, in turn, automatically associated power with the black shirt. Although the authors do not make the point, it seems at least possible that, by the time of the negotiations, Wolff was mentally off-key. In any case, after the surrender he was confined in an institution for the mentally ill for some months. Later the Germans convicted and jailed him as a war criminal. Dulles testified to Wolff's good qualities after the surrender. That was before the Treblinka congratulations came out.

A problem with clandestine operations is that the competence of the people directing them is also, at least for a time, concealed. It would have been well if we had had this book back in 1951 when Allen Dulles came back to Washington on his way to becoming the head of the CIA. We could then say that at least we had been warned. □