

Operation Snow: How A Soviet Mole in FDR's White House Triggered Pearl Harbor

John Koster

Regnery Publishing, 2012

Reviewed by Tadashi Hama

There are a number of works on the 1941 Japanese strike on Pearl Harbor that clearly demonstrate that the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Administration had ample warning of an attack by Japanese forces (Toland, 1982; Barnes, 1972). Furthermore, these works show a deliberate withholding of information by the Administration to US forces in Pearl Harbor, leading to the loss of over 2,000 lives. There are those who suggest that the Administration chose to sacrifice American lives in such a manner so that anglophile FDR could enter European War “on his white horse and save England” from Germany.

Up to the Pearl Harbor attack, the Administration, flouting US neutrality laws, sent secret military aid to Great Britain. The Administration also ordered American military forces in the Atlantic to provoke German forces, with the hope that “German attacks” would rally Americans in supporting involvement in yet another war in Europe (Buchanan, 2008). The Germans did not fall for the bait as they did not desire a war against America—and were even looking to terminate the state of hostilities with Great Britain so as to focus on war against the Soviet Union. American provocations went unanswered.

Given the state of affairs before the Pearl Harbor attack, it is not well understood why the FDR Administration chose to enter the European war through Asia. There was, in fact, some Administration interest in preserving the status quo in Asia, that is, preserving the territorial integrity of European colonies and stopping Japanese “aggression” through covert arming of the Chinese Nationalists, again circumventing neutrality laws, and economic sanctions. However, the all-consuming interest of the Administration at the time was war against Germany—and not Japan. The current book, *Operation Snow*, proposes that the Pearl Harbor attack was the product of a third party: the Soviet Union.

Historian John Koster's findings are a significant extension of the current literature on Pearl Harbor. The book is fascinating on two accounts, not only in detailing the Soviet role and the person responsible for provoking war between Japan and the US but also in vivid depiction of the personalities and events of a grim era.

Koster boldly dismisses “official versions,” “official histories,” and the “black-and-white, good guy-bad guy” histories of Pearl Harbor in particular and the US-Japan War in general that he “learned from high school and Hollywood.” Koster goes further, dismissing even controversial historians such as John Toland (*Infamy*, 1982), who

showed that FDR provoked then allowed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and Harry Elmer Barnes (*Pearl Harbor after a Quarter of a Century*, 1972), who not only showed that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt “deliberately planned the attack on Pearl Harbor” but also suggested that this was based in part on FDR’s pro-China (and rabidly anti-Japanese) sentiments.

While Koster does not place much weight on personal attitudes in shaping policy and decision making, it would be difficult to dismiss it out of hand. Indeed, a number of FDR Administration members were pro-China, in part due to an effective propaganda campaign by the “China Lobby,” a collection of western-educated Chinese Nationalists, Christian organizations and the US media (Bradley, 2015). A number of government officials, swayed by the China Lobby or with sentimental attachment to China instilled during their youth, as in the case of FDR, were also members of the Lobby. The Lobby’s sole objective was to channel American aid to Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists, the “pro-western Christian defenders of China”. (Despite the largesse of millions of dollars in cash and weapons the corrupt Nationalist regime eventually received, they were unable to either defeat the Japanese military in China or prevent a Chinese Communist victory.) At the same time, the Administration was overwhelmingly anti-Japanese in sentiment, as typified by FDR. He did not believe that the Japanese living in America would be able to assimilate and believed that the Japanese were an inferior species, below that of the Chinese as well as whites (Robinson, 2001). The current book notes that Stanley K. Hornbeck, the State Department’s “indestructible expert on Far Eastern Affairs” and one of four “special advisers” to FDR’s Secretary of State Cordell Hull was “unreasonably” and “intensely” anti-Japanese and that Hornbeck believed that “Orientals were cowardly and easily intimidated by threats and technology.” The current book also notes that Hornbeck’s boss, Hull, did not think highly of the Japanese, calling Special Envoy Saburo Kurusu and Ambassador Kichisaburo Nomura “scoundrels and piss-ants.” While it would be difficult to quantify the extent to which personalities influence public policy formation and decision making, it is unlikely that policy makers divorce themselves from their inclinations during office hours.

Koster bases his main subject on memoirs published in 1996 by retired KGB Lieutenant General Vitali Pavlov, who, in 1941, was the second-highest ranking NKVD agent responsible for espionage in America. The book opens with the fateful meeting in May 1941 between Pavlov and Harry Dexter White, a high ranking official in the Treasury Department, the “administration’s ranking expert on Japan” and Soviet agent.

At that time, the Soviets needed a way to keep Japan, their anticommunist rival in Asia, from attacking their eastern flank should the Germans attack their western front. The current book notes that information obtained by Soviet agents suggested the possibility of a treaty of neutrality between Great Britain and Germany and the strong possibility of a forthcoming German invasion of Soviet Russia. While nonaggression pacts were signed in 1939 with Germany and a pact of neutrality in April 1941 with Japan, the Soviets were nonetheless anxious at the prospect of fighting a two-front war. Thus, to keep the Japanese military away from Soviet borders, Soviet intelligence proposed concocting a war between Japan and the United States. White, as Treasury

Secretary Henry Morgenthau's "trusted assistant", was tasked by the Soviets to "provoke a war between the United States and Japan."

Under the guidance of White and his "puppet" Morgenthau, along with anti-Japan staffers in the State Department, the US pointedly rejected a number of Japanese peace overtures in the summer and fall of 1941. While prospects for a Japanese strike against the US looked promising, war was not yet entirely assured. Thus, White created two memos, one "composed for Morgenthau's signature" and to be passed onto FDR. The other memo was passed onto Hull. Both consisted of a "set of demands so likely, if accepted, to incite revolution in Japan that their rejection would be assured." Hornbeck had a hand in drafting what was to be known as the Hull note, the US's final offer. Hull presented the note on November 26, 1941. Koster states that the "Hull note—based on White's two memoranda—was, as far as the Japanese were concerned, a declaration of war." It should be noted that White did not rashly create the demands—they were deliberately fashioned to be absolutely unacceptable to Japan. Furthermore, White had given earlier consideration to the demands, composing a memo soon after meeting with Pavlov. The demands in this earlier memo were repeated, in modified form, in the Hull note, including withdrawal of Japanese military forces from China, including Manchuria, and the disposal of Japanese war material. As American responses to Japanese offers were consistently unreasonable, Japan prepared for the possibility of war. The final decision to attack came on December 1, the cabinet voting in favor in the presence of the Emperor; "Harry Dexter White gave us Pearl Harbor". The Soviet Union survived World War II—and White went on to serve as Soviet agent until he died in 1948. Indeed, the former Soviet Union regarded White as a hero.

Koster shows how White effortlessly and efficiently influenced foreign policy. Although his boss, Secretary Morgenthau headed Treasury, he was FDR's "old" and "close" friend. Morgenthau was also called the "second secretary of state" as he frequently advised FDR on foreign policy. At the same time, FDR "snubbed" Secretary of State Hull, whose appointment was viewed by FDR as a "sop to conservative Southern Democrats". Naturally, Hull resented FDR's snubbing. With the presence of anti-Japan/pro-China bureaucrats in key government positions, such as Hornbeck, who believed that the mere show of force would get Japan to comply with US demands, formulating anti-Japanese policy would be easy. With one department performing the duties of another department, White was perfectly poised to put in place a key Soviet policy; none of his colleagues ever suspected that he was a Soviet agent.

The main strength of Koster's book is that it unflinchingly exposes the extent of communist infiltration of FDR's inner circle and how Soviet agent White easily maneuvered within this milieu. Whether FDR was entirely aware or not of the extent of communist infiltration of his government has yet to be addressed in mainstream histories, but Koster suggests that FDR "unwittingly" gave cover to "White and other suspected communists" by "refusing to question their private or secret politics as long as they flattered him and deferred to him." The extent of Soviet infiltration of FDR's administration, as demonstrated by Koster's book and, by the US Army's operation to decode NKVD messages (VENONA), is made clear for all, countering mainstream

assertions that talk of Soviet infiltration was merely “paranoid rambling”. One wonders what the world would have looked like if Soviet agents and communists had not infiltrated FDR’s Administration.

Koster further shows his eschewal of the “black-and-white, good guy-bad guy” version of history as he confronts a number of myths, such as:

The “idea that the emperor [of Japan] enjoyed the absolute obedience of subjects who worshipped him as a god was the product of American wartime propaganda”;

That “the Japanese had wantonly strafed women and children” at Pearl Harbor. Koster states that the 68 civilians killed and 35 wounded were all most all “collateral damage,” from stray rounds from US forces;

“[Prime Minister Fumimaro] Konoye the peaceful... had been pushed aside by [War Minister General Hideki] Tojo the militarist” is an example of Americans “reinventing” Japanese history;

“The Bataan Death March... was not an organized, premeditated massacre.” While the “American death toll was reported at 5,200,” the actual death toll was “between 600 and 650”.

At the same time, there are a number of odd claims made in Koster’s book, such as the employment by the Japanese in Korea of “rape as a form of crowd control” and other allegations of atrocities. Such an allegation is difficult to take seriously as the Koreans vastly outnumbered the Japanese and Korean men would have surely rioted. Koster briefly notes that the Korean people did in fact benefit from “technical and educational improvements” made by the Japanese and Japanese construction of “schools, banks and railroads,” yet positioning allegations of Japanese atrocities next to these accomplishments not only debases them but is an affront to the Korean people. Former Korean Presidents have in fact praised the Japanese for modernizing Korea, a subservient vassal of China for most of its history.

Within a discussion of the Sino-Japanese War era, Koster does his best to confront the so-called “Rape of Nanking,” the alleged unrestrained killing and raping of Chinese by the Japanese military following Nanking’s capture on December 13, 1937. The current book states that during a six-week period, there were “forty-two thousand Chinese dead” and “hundreds of rapes,” in addition to “looting” and “arson”. These figures contrast with the standard numbers the Chinese unthinkingly parrot, as stated in the book, which ranges from “300,000 murders and 20,000 rapes” and “400,000 murders and 80,000 rapes,” depending on the listener. It is well known that the Chinese Nationalist’s Ministry of Information routinely exaggerated death tolls and even fabricated battles that never occurred in order to raise American indignation and American money (Bradley, 2015). (The gruesomeness of the atrocities reported in Nanking in fact well-depicts the Chinese Nationalist “locust-armies” at the time, torturing anyone who fell into their hands, raping female captives and pillaging villages (Bradley,

2015).) In the case of Nanking, Koster concurs, stating that the “Chinese then inflated the numbers of killings... and the number of rapes, in an attempt to win the sympathy of the American public.” During the trial of General Iwane Matsui, who was in command of Japanese forces during the capture of Nanking, the General was “confronted with numbers supplied by the Chinese which were enormously exaggerated.” Based on false testimony, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East executed Matsui.

Members of the American media and clergy, in conjunction with Chinese Nationalists, were complicit in spreading the so called “Rape of Nanking”. Koster’s book includes references to Frank Tillman Durdin, a *New York Times* reporter who was at Nanking at the time. Before the Japanese attack on Nanking, Durdin reported that Chinese troops fled in panic as soon as they learned that General Chiang Kai-shek and commanding General Tang Sheng-chih slipped out of Nanking. Chinese troops “still committed to battle” turned their guns on their retreating comrades. Surviving Chinese troops fled into the safety zone—a demilitarized neutral area setup by foreign residents—with their small arms and heavy weapons (Campaign for the Truth of Nanking, 2013; Tanaka, 2000). After Japanese forces entered the city, Durdin went on to state that “Chinese women were freely molested by Japanese soldiers, and American missionaries personally know of cases...” and “twenty thousand” were “executed”. However, it is unlikely that he saw any of this as he had left Nanking with other journalists two days after the Japanese capture of Nanking. Furthermore, a comparison of his article with one written on December 15 by Archibald Steele of the *Chicago Daily News* suggests that Durdin copied Steele’s report. Actually, the ultimate source of both of their reports was a memo passed out to foreign reporters by Reverend Miner S. Bates, an advisor to the Chinese Nationalists (Campaign for the Truth of Nanking, 2013; Higashinakano, 2008). Koster suggests that Durdin was respected by both the Japanese and Chinese, but this is difficult to understand. The Chinese could complain that his count of Chinese victims in Nanking is too low and the Japanese could state his report was based on a memo contrived by a known Nationalist agent.

The current book mentions one other “witness” to the “Rape of Nanking”, John Rabe. While Koster notes that Rabe was a member of the Nazi Party, what is not mentioned is that he was president of Siemens’ Far East operations (Tanaka, 2000). During the 1930s, the Germans sent military advisors to the Nationalists and supplied them with arms through companies like Siemens (Campaign for the Truth of Nanking, 2013). China was in fact viewed as a massive market by German industry (Furuso, 2007). While allies on the surface, Hitler loathed the Japanese, calling them “yellow peril” (Buchanan, 2008). Rabe claimed that the Japanese “turned tail and ran” whenever they saw his Nazi party armband—indicating a deep underlying contempt for the Japanese (Furuso, 2007). Perhaps Rabe hated the Japanese, as his future fortunes were tied with the Nationalists, who were soundly defeated by the Japanese with every military encounter. Whatever his motivations, his claims to witnessing Japanese atrocities, as written in his diary, cannot be trusted. Indeed, he reported Japanese atrocities merely on hearsay and not on what he actually saw. Even a *New York Times* review of Rabe’s diary, which was published in English in 1998, found difficulty finding any credibility to his claims (Furuso, 2007). What is interesting, nonetheless, is that he provided regular censuses of

Nanking, before, during and after the period when the alleged atrocities occurred, which was constantly at 200,000. By the time of his last census, February 10, 1938, the city had grown to 250,000. Whatever he claimed about mass murders is undone by work from the group, the Nanking International Safety Zone Committee, that he headed.

While Koster states that author Masaaki Tanaka “outright” denies the “Rape of Nanking” occurred, Tanaka points out that other world leaders, including Chiang Kai-shek and even Mao Zedong, raised no protest, “outright” or not, concerning a “Nanking massacre” (Tanaka, 2000). In fact, during a series of lectures in 1938, Mao chided Japan for not thoroughly annihilating the Nationalists at Nanking (Tanaka, 2000). The English language almanac, *The China Yearbook*, published by the Shanghai-based North China Daily News and Herald, for 1938 as well as 1939 did not mention a “Rape of Nanking” (Higashinakano, 2005). The “Rape of Nanking” could have been potent ammunition for anti-Japan groups worldwide, including the US China Lobby, but there was no news of it at all. Indeed, the biggest international incident of 1937 was Japan’s accidental sinking of the *USS Panay* and Japan’s subsequent apologies and restitution to America.

Some readers of the current book will wonder why White’s role in launching a US-Japan war for the Soviets was not revealed much sooner, before the publication of Pavlov’s book in 1996. White’s government papers are archived at Princeton University and US Army Intelligence and the FBI knew that White was a Soviet agent. Interestingly, Barnes (1972) noted the extent of communist infiltration of FDR’s administration, but nonetheless downplayed any role that it might have had in the lead up to Pearl Harbor—the exact opposite view that Koster takes in his book. Nonetheless, any attempt to point out the extent of Soviet infiltration of the FDR White House or the extent of Soviet espionage in America in general is usually shouted down as “rightwing scare mongering” and further discussion is stymied. Thus, history is written in rosy images, in black-and-white terms and suppressing unpleasant facts. Koster’s has written a rare exception.

References

Barnes, H.E.

(1972) *Pearl Harbor after a Quarter of a Century*. NY, NY: Arno Press.

Bradley, J.

(2015) *The China Mirage: The Hidden History of American Disaster in Asia*. NY, NY: Little, Brown and Co.

Buchanan, P.J.

(2008) *Churchill, Hitler and the Unnecessary War*. NY, NY: Crown Books.

Campaign for the Truth of Nanking

(2013) *There Was a Battle of Nanking but there was no “Nanking Massacre,”* Tokyo: Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact.

Furuso, K.

(2007) Hitler and the “Nanking Massacre” Exposed in Rabe’s Diary. [English translation] *WiLL*, December.

Higashinakano, S.

(2005) *The Nanking Massacre; Fact Versus Fiction*. Tokyo: Sekai Shuppan.

Higashinakano, S.

(2008) *Top-Secret Chinese Nationalist Documents Reveal the Truth about the Nanking Incident*. Tokyo: Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact.

Robinson, G.

(2001) *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tanaka, M.

(2000) *What Really Happened in Nanking?* Tokyo: Sekai Shuppan.

Toland, J.

(1982) *Infamy: Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath*. Garden City, NJ; Double Day.