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FDR's Female Secret Agent Wore Two Hats

by Derek Leebaert

Much remains unknown about Franklin Roosevelt's long presidency because historians have always spotlighted the titanic leader himself, while shedding comparatively little light on some of his closest associates.

One of them was Frances Perkins, FDR's secretary of labor, one of only four people who served at the top echelon of FDR's administrations from beginning to end. (The others were Harold Ickes, secretary of the interior; Henry Wallace, who led the biggest government department, Agriculture, and became vice president in 1941; and Harry Hopkins, FDR's de facto secretary of public welfare and then his diplomatic alter ego during the war. Together, they were the single most important "team" to have ever shaped their country's destiny.

Labor secrerary and secret agent (Source: Frances Perkins Center)

But all four did more than create and implement New Deal reforms and then later help mobilize the nation for the looming Second World War. At the advent of the conflict in the late 1930s, all of them inserted themselves into what existed of U.S. intelligence gathering—activities that have gone unrecognized over the decades. But especially Frances Perkins.

Perkins was 53 at the start of her tenure in 1933—the first woman in a presidential cabinet. But she shouldered responsibilities far beyond her official remit, as did the others. It would be Perkins, a one-time high school chemistry teacher-turned prominent New York State progressive labor activist and official, whom FDR most often chose to deal with problems of domestic subversion and foreign intelligence. Roosevelt trusted her completely.

Like FDR, the Massachusetts-born Perkins could trace her family roots to colonial America. And also like FDR, Perkins, a graduate of Mt. Holyoke College, was fluent in French, competent in German, and for much of her life, as a self-invented Boston brahmin, she had also been oriented toward Europe. She had a keen interest in global affairs and, again like FDR, was appalled in January 1933 when Hitler was appointed German chancellor. Settling into her Labor Department office, she became alarmed about U.S. susceptibility to German propaganda, in particular the activities of the new National Socialist regime's American sympathizers.

The FBI of that era was preoccupied with gangsters and kidnappers, while intelligence from overseas derived largely from the country's diplomats and military attachés. Roosevelt, however, preferred his own sources. Increasingly, he relied on Perkins, both for her information and insight—yet to be labeled "counterintelligence"—and, as war clouds gathered, for her understanding of Europe's crumbling balance of power.

Had it not been for the Great Depression, Perkins concluded in her vast oral history[1] for Columbia University, the president would have preferred to devote most of his efforts during the 1930s to foreign policy. FDR grasped the danger of Japan's colonial expansion into China and was quick to identify Hitler as a madman. Concerning the Soviet Union, Roosevelt pushed for diplomatic recognition, hoping for trade benefits. That was accomplished in November 1933, once Moscow pledged not to involve itself with Com-

1. https://clio.columbia.edu/catalog/7144689

munist subversion and espionage within the United States. It was a promise, of course, made to be broken.

BREAKING THE BUND

Perkins's initial venture into intelligence matters occurred in tandem with Interior Secretary Ickes,[2] whose sweeping mandate from FDR made him the country's second most powerful New Deal implementor. Throughout, Perkins drew on sources ranging from grassroots labor organizers to the titans of finance, whom she knew from New York society. In October 1933, she told Ickes that Germany was dispatching several hundred agents to the United States to join ethnic organizations such as the Wisconsin Federation of German-American Societies. The purpose, she explained, was to stoke anti-Jewish, Nordic chauvinist biases, and to gain political influence.

Ickes had established himself as a champion of the downtrodden. So fervent was he that, despite being white, he had become president of Chicago's NAACP. He also had formed the city's Indian Rights Association, and was becoming a passionate Zionist. The morning after Perkins's warning of Germany subversion, he called a friend in Chicago, Superior Court Judge Harry M. Fisher, president of Chicago's Zionist Organization, with a warning. Germany's ambassador, he told Fisher, would soon be traveling through the Midwest; they agreed to have his activities monitored.

It was the first of several such quiet collaborations between Perkins and Ickes. And they decided not to brief Roosevelt on the surveillance plan. It was better that such details be kept at arm's length from him: Questions about Berlin's political influence in the U.S. were becoming sensitive and he had to weigh German-American opinion in such states as Wisconsin, where 40 percent of citizens claimed German ancestry. FDR would leave the details to these closest of subordinates.

While Germany rearmed in defiance of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles,[3] Perkins traveled to Europe more frequently than any of her cabinet colleagues, including Secretary of State Cordell Hull, whom FDR generally sidelined from the intelligence front. It was important to Perkins to attend conferences at the International Labor Organization in Geneva,[4] a gold mine of intelligence, particularly about Germany.

One such trip occurred in the summer of 1936, four months after 35,000 German troops marched into the Rhineland.[5] From Geneva she traveled on holiday through Austria, observing all, talking alike with shopkeepers and industrialists. Her first opportunity to deliver a detailed report to FDR was at lunch in the Oval Office on September 17. He included Ickes.

Perkins told both what she had learned overseas: Basically, Nazi Germany was certain to absorb Austria. All three recognized that military annexation would embolden Hitler to prey on Europe's small democracies, like the new state of Czechoslovakia.

Roosevelt, as well as Ickes, was less attuned to dangers from Moscow. Not Perkins. She was acting alone when tracking Communist Party operatives through the labyrinths of labor union politics. Using her grassroot sources, she detected their presence in such pivotal unions as the American Radio Association,[6] which was part of the left-leaning Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).[7] She would trace agents in one union or factory who, after a time, would submerge, only to turn up a year or two later as shop stewards elsewhere under another name, playing politics.

Perkins's colleagues had less interest in these findings. The immediate threat was Germany.

FRENCH TWIST

By 1938, Roosevelt was raising ever more questions in cabinet meetings about the fate of Europe, "often to the detriment of his interest in domestic affairs," Perkins observed. She intended to ferret out answers for him.

On June 8, 1938, she arrived in Paris for meetings at the *Ministère du Travail*. Through social connections, she arranged a lunch with Marshall Philippe Pétain, 82, the hero of Verdun and a fervent admirer of FDR.[8] Pétain assured her that France's Maginot Line[9] was impregnable and his nation stronger than ever. But in a five-week journey through France, in which she

2. See his biography at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold_L._Ickes
3. https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Versailles-1919
4. https://www.ilo.org/global/lang—en/index.htm
5. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhineland
6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Radio_Association
7. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congress_of_Industrial_Organizations
8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Verdun. Also see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philippe_Pétain
9. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maginot_Line

Labor Secretary Frances Perkins gathered intelligence abroad and thwarted Axis and Communist subversion at home

engaged farmers, townspeople, conscripts on leave and local officials, she was startled to hear their contempt for the *gratin* in Paris—and their certainty that France's army was hollow.

Back home on August 15, she reported her impressions to FDR at another Oval Office lunch. This time the president included a vice admiral from the fleet's Scouting Force, another figure on whom he

FDR had full confidence in his secret agent (Source: Frances Perkins Center)

depended for delicate arms negotiations. Her message to them was direct: "If anybody gave France a good push with a fist, she'd go all to pieces and fall."

Roosevelt was puzzled. The State Department, he said, was giving him the same assurances about French defenses that she had heard from Pétain.

In parallel, Roosevelt was drawing on another unlikely source of intelligence. Agriculture Secretary Henry Wallace's sister Mary was living in Prague with her husband, Switzerland's ambassador there. And Switzerland had a highly refined espionage apparatus. Mary was extracting unique information from within the embassy—as the Sudetenland crisis[10] intensified that fall—and reporting by pouch to her brother, and thereby to President Roosevelt.

10. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sudetenland

MOSCOW SHOCK

Almost exactly a year to the date after Perkins had warned FDR about France's vulnerability, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in Moscow.[11] America had already started rearming, albeit at a snail's pace, much of that effort being conducted by Harry Hopkins's Works Progress Administration.[12] No sooner was the odious pact announced than Perkins detected incidents of Communist sabotage within key industrial plants. Fears were that gears could literally be jammed at many Midwest Allis-Chalmers heavy machinery plants and on the assembly line at Bendix in South Bend, Indiana.

Hopkins and the others were now shaken, but she urged calm. As labor secretary, she had assisted the military police in deploying undercover officers "in every factory that had any kind of important arms contract," she recalled in her oral history.

Events were moving fast. In June 1940, France collapsed within five weeks under Germany's blitzkrieg. Secretary of State Hull had the decency to apologize to Perkins for not having grasped her earlier warnings. By then, she, Ickes, and an increasingly alarmed administration were focused on the activities of the Hitler-inspired U.S. Nazi organization, the *Amerika-deutscher Volksbund*, or German American Bund.[13] Still, much went undetected.

That year, Idaho's Senator William Borah, ranking member on the Foreign Relations Committee—a fervent isolationist, who prided himself on living modestly—died suddenly from a fall. Nearly $200,000 (about $4.2 million in 2023 dollars) turned up in his safe deposit box. It was from Berlin, concluded former Senator Thomas Gore, according to his grandson, novelist Gore Vidal, "to keep us out of war." But all evidence points to Borah having been a witting agent of Germany.

Once Hitler turned against his Soviet ally on June 22, 1941, Perkins saw Bolshevik subversion in defense plants cease overnight. She knew that the Communist Party USA, which she held responsible for the activity, always fell into line behind Stalin's interests.

Roosevelt promptly enabled the Soviet Union to receive Lend Lease aid—roughly six times more than would ever go to Britain, with none of the conditions

11. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Molotov–Ribbentrop_Pact
12. https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/works-progress-administration
13. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_American_Bund

imposed on Britain.[14] Harry Hopkins ran the entire operation as chairman of the Soviet Protocol Committee, set up to oversee the aid, from 1942 until summer 1945.[15] It was an effort permeated by Stalin's U.S. operatives, but Hopkins was unconcerned: the USSR was now a critical anti-Axis ally. FDR, meanwhile, was confident that he could "handle" the man they called Uncle Joe.

Perkins's ad hoc intelligence tasks ended by the time America entered combat in the winter of 1941-1942, as did the contributions of Ickes and Wallace. The FBI was now fully alert to German subversion, and, in June 1942, the OSS was founded to wage unconventional war against the Nazis in Europe and Japanese in China.[16] Roosevelt, now war lord, would show an astounding capacity for strategy and logistics. When he died on April 12, 1945, weeks before VE Day, the Pentagon listed him as a casualty of war.

FDR enjoyed remarking that, when he heard experts on international affairs claim war to be imminent, he could rest easy; he worried when they sounded confident of peace. He approached intelligence gathering, and much else, in that insouciant spirit. It could lead to some spectacular miscalculations, as over Stalin, whom FDR seemed truly to believe would allow free elections in Poland, the Baltic republics, or anywhere in Eastern Europe.[17] On the other hand, it was an effective approach that might pertain today: When worlds are at stake, hear out the experts, but rely on insights from brilliant, unconventional talents whom you keep close.

Derek Leebaert's latest book is *Unlikely Heroes: Franklin Roosevelt, His Four Lieutenants, and the World They Made*. In 2020 he won the biennial 2020 Truman Book Award for *Grand Improvisation: America Confronts the British Superpower, 1945-1957*. He cofounded Harvard/MIT's journal *International Security*, and helped launch the Museum of the US Army.

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14. https://www.britannica.com/topic/lend-lease
15. https://snaccooperative.org/view/70610322
16. https://www.history.com/news/oss-the-predecessor-of-the-cia
17. See Michael Fredholm. "How Sweden Chose Sides," When Intelligence Made a Difference, *The Intelligencer, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Spring-Summer 2019), pp. 41-3.*