

Naval War College Review

Volume 28
Number 5 Autumn

Article 11

1975

Origins of Intelligence Services: The Ancient Near East, Persia, Greece, Rome, Byzantium, the Arab Muslim Empires, the Mongol Empire, China, Muscovy

Curtis C. Davis
U.S. Army Reserve (Ret.)

Francis Dvornik

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Davis, Curtis C. and Dvornik, Francis (1975) "Origins of Intelligence Services: The Ancient Near East, Persia, Greece, Rome, Byzantium, the Arab Muslim Empires, the Mongol Empire, China, Muscovy," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 28 : No. 5 , Article 11. Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol28/iss5/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

104 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

reader who is simply seeking greater knowledge in this area and who has an objective mind will no doubt benefit by reading this book and will probably understand a bit better the process that is a never-ending one in the world of technology, politics, and the Defense Department.

JOHN T. HAYWARD
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy (Ret.)

Dvornik, Francis. *Origins of Intelligence Services: The Ancient Near East, Persia, Greece, Rome, Byzantium, the Arab Muslim Empires, the Mongol Empire, China, Muscovy*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1974. 334pp.

This attractive volume by a multi-lingual, Czech-born scholar now based at the Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies had its origin in a post-World War II ambition of Maj. Gen. William J. Donovan, former director of the Office of Strategic Services. The general, we are told, "disclosed his intention of writing a history of the Intelligence Service [unspecified] in order to show its importance in safeguarding the nation." While Donovan's opus failed to materialize, the present title, dedicated to him, marks the fruition of at least a part of his original plan. As the only book-length work on its subject known to the present writer, the result should have been a landmark. In a way it is, but the net effect is also frustrating.

If either a military person or mere civilian buff hopes to find in these pages a pageant of neatly broken down activities of "secret services," he will be disappointed. What he will find is that the Assyrian postal system was developed over the centuries (by themselves and others) into news-gathering facilities and warning nets wherein the use of fire towers and pigeons was fundamental. Along the way he will learn that merchants, traitors, deserters,

returned prisoners of war, and diplomatic officials were regularly utilized by governments or ruling houses to learn something about each other. Scarcely electrifying.

Along the way, too, the author makes inordinate use of such phrases as "has the impression," "some indication that . . .," "it is thus natural to suppose," and similar generalizations which he fails to bring to the point of demonstration. There are too many pages of straight historical background history, a constant tendency to equate intelligence processing, as we understand it today, with mere fact collecting, and at least one confusion of "intentions" with capabilities (p. 50). The book's index is far from complete. In the bibliography to the Byzantine section, the author might well have included W.G. Sinnigen's "Two Branches of the Late Roman Secret Service," *American Journal of Philology*, July 1959, pp. 238-254.

But let us now turn to the volume's assets. It has 21 illustrations which, though only one pertains to intelligence work, are yet of interest. There are no less than 18 cleanly drawn maps. Each of the six major divisions of the text is followed by a lengthy bibliography; and while there is no annotation, textual citations are clear. Throughout the book there is a whole hatful of intriguing *curiosa* to savor, such as an early example of "Potemkin villages," Hannibal's use of "disinformation," and the origin of those stories about Sinbad the Sailor which ought to satisfy the most avid trivia fans. Dr. Dvornik—confronted with a gaping paucity of documents in the vast emptiness of ancient times—has striven mightily and he has come forth with a landmark of sorts. For that accomplishment, at least one of his readers is grateful.

CURTIS C. DAVIS
Lieutenant Colonel, USAR (Ret.)