



4-1-2007

Stephen Budiansky, *Her Majesty's Spymaster: Elizabeth I, Sir Francis Walsingham, and the Birth of Modern Espionage*

Laina Farhat-Holzman
lfarhat102@aol.com

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Recommended Citation

Farhat-Holzman, Laina (2007) "Stephen Budiansky, *Her Majesty's Spymaster: Elizabeth I, Sir Francis Walsingham, and the Birth of Modern Espionage*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 56 : No. 56 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol56/iss56/12>

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Stephen Budiansky, *Her Majesty's Spymaster: Elizabeth I, Sir Francis Walsingham, and the Birth of Modern Espionage*, Viking, 2005.

Summary:

Reading any aspect of history of Shakespeare's England is fascinating in its own right—but this book explores an issue that reverberates in our own time. During the 16th century, Europe was engaged in both hot and cold wars that involved clashing ideologies—the feudal underpinnings of Catholicism versus the Protestant Reformation which brought in changes in politics, religion, and technology and gave rise to the modern world. The stakes were high for both sides, particularly for England—which is the subject of this book.

It is difficult to sympathize with Henry VIII, who broke with the Catholic Church that had been the bedrock of British society for a thousand years. His reasons for the break were political, not theological (unlike Luther); the Pope refused to dissolve his marriage so that he could marry his mistress, so Henry created his own church. Furthermore, once the break was made, he seized the opportunity to loot the rich holdings of the church—the monasteries and convents—to enrich his own coffers. Good people who did not see these reasons as sufficient to warrant their dropping their ancient faith resisted—and were imprisoned and executed. In the ancient pattern of most of the world, when the Prince changes religion, so do his subjects. Henry assumed this prerogative—but it never sat well with the British.

After Henry and his sickly son died, his very Catholic daughter, Mary, became monarch and launched a five-year pogrom aimed at restoring Catholicism in Britain. Upon her death, her sister Elizabeth, a Protestant, became Queen and she was adamant about the role of religion in her England. She maintained the Church of England that her father had begun and demanded that everybody attend services. However, she did not intend to investigate her subjects' private consciences. Outward conformity was what she demanded—for the sake of national peace. The great Catholic families were permitted to practice their faith—as long as they did not threaten her throne or conspire with the Catholic powers against England.

Her tightrope walk is the subject of *Her Majesty's Spymaster* and the hero of this book is Sir Francis Walsingham, who maintained England's freedom and independence by organizing a network of spies and secret agents that became the model for future conflicts of compa-

rable urgency. Knowing what the other side was planning for you could prevent bloodshed or worse—the loss of independence and freedom.

I have learned from other books about Shakespeare's time how pervasive the spy network was in Elizabeth's England, but never really understood the justification for this. Elizabeth was truly nation building, depending upon a national school system from village level up that could identify and educate young men of modest backgrounds but promising talent. This is another aspect of the Protestant Reformation that created a society in which meritocracy, not feudal caste, produced a competent ruling class. The printing press, increasing literacy, and a state-run school system, gave England an advantage of competence that Catholic France, for example, did not have.

Sir Francis Walsingham is an example of this competence. A young man of modest means and a staunch Protestant with a well-developed sense of duty, he was earmarked for government service by his colleagues and by the Queen. The one event that shaped the rest of his life occurred when he was Ambassador to France. He witnessed the Bartholomew's Day Massacre in which the French King resolved the Catholic-Protestant conflicts in France by luring the leading Huguenots to Paris for a state wedding and then massacring them—not only in Paris but throughout France. It was genocidal—and Walsingham was horrified. He could see the consequences of this action for England if France, Spain, or the Pope found an opening, perhaps either through a Catholic marriage for Elizabeth or by replacing her on the throne with a Catholic candidate—such as Mary, Queen of Scots.

When he returned to England, he reported to the queen and she immediately saw the danger to her and to England. For the rest of her reign, Walsingham was made responsible for keeping England independent. The stakes for England were no less urgent than the World War II conflict between western democracies and Hitler's fascist empire—or after that with the Soviet Union—another empire that would crush freedom. Knowing what the other side was planning—or aborting deadly attacks—was the business of our spy services and is once more involved in the global conflict between the secular world and religious fascism.

One can read *The Queen's Spymaster* with our own time in mind. The book is well documented as well as thoroughly readable.

Laina Farhat-Holzman