

H-Net Reviews

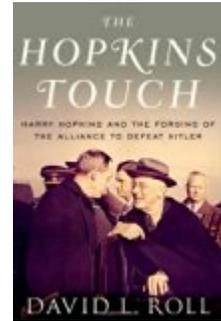
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David L. Roll. *The Hopkins Touch: Harry Hopkins and the Forging of the Alliance to Defeat Hitler*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 510 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-989195-5.

Reviewed by John Hess (University of Kansas)

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An Insightful Portrait

David L. Roll's biography of Harry Hopkins—*The Hopkins Touch: Harry Hopkins and the Forging of the Alliance to Defeat Hitler*—examines the influence of one of Franklin Roosevelt's most trusted advisors on the wartime diplomacy of the Second World War. Hopkins, Roll argues, played a vital role in not only forging the Anglo-American-Soviet alliance, but also in preserving it throughout the course of the conflict. Whereas other writers have characterized Hopkins as "Roosevelt's fixer," Roll contends that he was much more active in forging the alliance by using his skill in personal diplomacy and cutting through bureaucratic red tape (p. 408). Ultimately, "a little touch of Harry" helped shape and preserve the wartime coalition that defeated Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany (p. 8).

Roll begins by tracing Hopkins's roots back to Iowa and charting his emergence as an ambitious New Deal reformer during the depths of the Great Depression. As Hopkins rose through the proverbial ranks of reformers from the Red Cross to the executive branch he developed the skills that would prove vital for wartime diplomacy: namely, personal diplomacy and an ability to get to the root of the matter of important questions. Initially tasked with running the Works Progress Administration, Hopkins's influence steadily grew in the Roosevelt administration and Roll argues that by 1940 he was one of Roosevelt's most trusted advisors. When Hopkins eventually moved in to the White House—where he would live for the next three years—his status was merely confirmed.

Hopkins's increasingly close relationship with the president, Roll contends, emphasized foreign affairs and the war above all, which led to many New Dealers like Eleanor Roosevelt to feel betrayed by his relationship with FDR. Nevertheless, Hopkins played a vital diplomatic role throughout the war, even before the United States entered as an active belligerent. He met with both Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin before FDR and worked out what both the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union needed from Lend-Lease (chapters 4, 5, and 6). Hopkins also helped organize early meetings between American and British leaders, including the Atlantic Conference off the coast of Newfoundland. Yet most important, Roll argues, was Hopkins's ability to preserve the coalition whenever it appeared likely to fracture. When the allies were at odds in 1942 about the potential invasion of North Africa, Hopkins used behind-the-scenes diplomacy to advocate getting American soldiers into combat as quickly as possible, even if the theater was not mainland Europe (chapters 9, 10, and 11). Therefore, Hopkins was vitally important in making what Roll terms "the most important strategic decision" of the Anglo-American war effort (p. 366).

Hopkins continued to use his abilities in personal diplomacy throughout the rest of the war. After Churchill again tried to delay Operation Overlord at the 1943 Tehran Conference, Hopkins again used his skill and good relationship with the British prime minister to urge him to "yield with grace" on his opposition to the cross-channel invasion (p. 323). The influence of Hopkins

reached its pinnacle at Tehran, but as his health deteriorated because of intestinal complications from a previous bout of stomach cancer Hopkins lost the president's ear. He recovered enough to travel to Yalta with Roosevelt in 1945, but even Hopkins's good relationship with Stalin could not overcome the fissures in the alliance that began to appear once Germany's defeat appeared certain. Nevertheless, Roll argues, Hopkins's prior work had succeeded in forging, and holding together, the alliance to defeat Hitler.

Roll presents an insightful portrait of one of Roosevelt's closest advisors. Beyond his work within the administration, Hopkins's somewhat tumultuous personal life receives significant attention, as does his notable health problems. Drawing on a wide variety of personal papers, memoirs, and secondary sources, Roll's research is impressive, wide-ranging, and paints a picture of an advisor who was much more than FDR's errand boy, as some writers have claimed. There are no groundbreaking interpretations of the European war in Roll's work. Instead it adopts many of the arguments made by military historians in recent decades, namely the primacy of the eastern front as the most important theater in the war and necessity of bloodying American soldiers before conducting the cross-channel invasion. Yet the absence of new arguments is relatively unimportant in a biogra-

phy that argues for the importance of Hopkins in holding together the coalition.

While Roll's biography is undoubtedly interesting and easy to read, that does not mean it is without its faults. While the author does draw upon a wide array of sources, the influence of one book, Robert Sherwood's 1948 biography *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, is seen repeatedly throughout the work. Sherwood's work is obviously important for any scholar of Harry Hopkins, yet at times Roll relies on it to the exclusion of other sources. Similarly, there is little discussion of the historiography surrounding Hopkins, who was clearly an important and oft-studied figure. Without a survey of the historiography, at least in the introduction, it is difficult for a reader to see where the work fits within the literature. Finally, in the absence of clear evidence Roll's narrative often employs "could have" or "may have" when discussing Hopkins's actions and motives. There is nothing wrong with supposition, but at times it makes the reader long for more authoritative arguments.

Nevertheless, Roll's biography of Harry Hopkins is illuminating, well organized, and well written. Professors may have difficulty using the work in an undergraduate class because of its focus on one individual, but it will surely attract a large audience from amongst both historians and the general public alike.

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