

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sherry Sontag, Christopher Drew. *Blind Man's Bluff: The Untold Story of American Submarine Espionage*. New York: Public Affairs, 1998. 304 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-891620-08-9.

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The world's historians owe a debt to Francis Gary Powers, who bailed out of his crippled U-2 over Sverdlovsk on May 1, 1960. The Soviet SAM that brought him down not only blew the cover on the top secret U-2 flights, it also opened a window on years of other photo reconnaissance and SIGINT flights by the U.S.A. and UK. No such event ever exposed the Cold War espionage effort carried out by submarines, although this was a massive program beginning almost immediately after World War II, and one that consumed hundreds of billions of dollars. That is why *Blind Man's Bluff* is, in large part, "the untold story" of these missions.

Sherry Sontag and Christopher Drew, both New York reporters, have done their homework: they have spent years reading declassified documents, submarine log books and cruise books, and old newspaper articles. Perhaps most importantly, they interviewed dozens if not hundreds of those involved in submarine spying, from Pentagon officials to ordinary crew members. Sometimes they tracked down captains, seamen and spooks, on other occasions people sought them out. But most of these interviews seem to have been done very quietly, with Navy investigators often close behind. These sources were desperate for someone to hear their stories now that the Cold War was over, despite security regulations.

The resulting book is a mixed bag. On the one hand, there is a lot of new (at least to this reviewer) information on the early days of submarine intelligence, the tailing of Soviet missile subs, and, especially, on the tapping of Soviet undersea cables. There is also some new information on the loss of the USS Scorpion and the disappointing project intended to recover a sunken Russian sub in the Pacific—events that have been the subjects of previous books and articles. And, there are important in-

sights into how these missions—risky to the crews, risky to world peace—were approved at the very top levels in Washington. On the negative side, *Blind Man's Bluff* provides a keyhole view of history.

The cable tapping missions are a good illustration of the limitations of Sontag and Drew's sources. Several American subs, beginning in 1971, crept into the Sea of Okhotsk, near the Kamchatka Peninsula and the Soviet Pacific naval bases, and then later penetrated the Barents Sea in the Arctic. In each location, they squatted on the seafloor to release divers who installed huge taps—twenty feet long, weighing several tons—atop Soviet undersea communications cables. The taps, filled with recorders powered by miniature nuclear reactors, picked up months of secret phone calls and data from the Soviet navy. The spy subs then sneaked back in to retrieve the recordings. *Blind Man's Bluff* captures much of the personal drama of these missions, performed right under the nose of the Russians, in shallow waters and well inside territorial limits.

What we do not have, of course, is a comprehensive evaluation of the intelligence the taps produced. How many hours of tape were recovered? Were the experts at the CIA and National Security Agency able to decode all of it? What did the resulting information tell us that we did not already know? All of this is missing, obviously, because it is classified and will remain so for years, probably decades to come. Not surprisingly, the senior intelligence evaluators did not meet Sontag and Drew in suburban diners to answer these questions.

Relying on men who would talk also contributes to the technothriller atmosphere of many of the chapters in the book. The missions described seem to have been weeks of boredom spiced with a few hours of terror,

and the crew members were mostly typical submarine crewmen—though all volunteers. But here is the authors' portrait of Commander Chester M. Mack of the USS Lapon: "Submarines were just too small to contain Whitey Mack. He was a larger-than-life renegade, much like the heroes in the novels he devoured by the basketful." Such hyperbolic language is the exception, but it does detract from *Blind Man's Bluff's* impact.

Perhaps the most disturbing thing I took away from reading this book was the pervasive illegality of this espionage. Of course spying meant violating Soviet airspace and territorial waters, but the missions portrayed here broke all the rules, from Navy regulations at the low end to American law and international treaties at the other. It was seen as necessary to falsify logbooks, lie to Admiral Rickover, and "steal" money from other Navy programs in order to carry these projects out. Bullying and lying to journalists and the U.S. Congress were also part of the game. One might think that the buck would stop at the Oval Office, but every president mentioned in *Blind Man's Bluff*, including such politically disparate men as Carter and Reagan, was immediately entranced by the secret photos and intelligence they were shown at their ini-

tial briefings about the missions. And all of these leaders and their advisers were so enamored of the gadgetry and insider-only information that they always approved dangerous new missions, even when simultaneously negotiating arms-reductions treaties which were clearly jeopardized by this espionage.

To their credit, Sontag and Drew state this question—was it worth the lives and treasure spent?—very clearly. It is also to their credit that this is a carefully written and edited book, with a good index and 36 pages of notes. They cannot cite all their sources, for obvious reasons, but they do name names whenever possible, and provide references to previous books, articles and the vast numbers of government documents they consulted. All the books on U.Ss. and Soviet submarine operations during the Cold War to come, and all those on American intelligence during that period, will have to take note of *Blind Man's Bluff*.

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