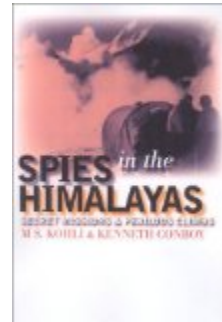


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

M. S. Kohli, Kenneth Conboy. *Spies in the Himalayas: Secret Missions and Perilous Climbs*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. xi + 226 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1223-9.

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In the summer of 1965, an elite group of mountaineers began a series of expeditions in the Himalayas of northwestern Uttar Pradesh. Their initial target was the south face of Nanda Devi, one of the highest (25,645 ft.) and most inaccessible peaks in the world. It was a formidable challenge, but the team had a full roster of world-renowned climbers, including veterans of the first American and Indian ascents of Mount Everest. Yet this was no *National Geographic*-sponsored international goodwill tour. The mission's secret objective was to place a plutonium-powered sensor near the summit that could gather data on China's ballistic missile program. It was the apogee of more than a decade of clandestine cooperation between Indian intelligence and the CIA.

*Spies in the Himalayas: Secret Missions and Dangerous Climbs*, by M. S. Kohli and Kenneth Conboy, is the first book-length treatment of this ill-fated attempt at high-altitude espionage. Despite the subject matter, it is not a particularly scintillating read. The publisher bills *Spies in the Himalayas* as a scholarly version of *Into Thin Air*, but its plodding prose has none of Jon Krakauer's breathless urgency. It also disappoints as an academic work: the story is narrowly focused and there is little historiographic background. *Spies* is so dependent on the recollections of the Indian expedition leader, M. S. Kohli, that it might be classified as a memoir. His appealing persona, however, is subsumed in a stiff, third-person narrative. Nevertheless, there are several vignettes in *Spies* that will fascinate students of intelligence history. These tidbits are important enough to earn the book a qualified recommendation.

Bhola Nath Mullik's attempt to establish an enduring secret relationship between India and the United States is

the most significant revelation in *Spies in the Himalayas*. A close associate of Nehru, Mullik was director of the Indian Intelligence Bureau (IB) from 1950 until the prime minister's death in 1964 (pp. 10-11). He fostered a cadre of like-minded, anti-communist prot=ges—an ideological bent that put them at odds with much of the Indian establishment. During Nehru's premiership the IB worked with the CIA to sponsor Tibetan guerrillas and warned against Chinese expansionism long before the Sino-Indian border war of 1962.[1] Kohli and Conboy's account proves that Mullik retained considerable influence after his resignation. In 1965, he had sufficient pull in Delhi to get the Himalayan sensor project off the ground, coordinate details with the Americans, and protect the program against bureaucratic interference. Scholars with an interest in intelligence and Indian-American relations will find that Mullik's story sheds new light on the history of the Cold War. *Spies in the Himalayas* and Conboy's related work, *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet*, may serve as a platform for exciting new research.[2]

Yet the remarkable section on Mullik is also symptomatic of the book's principle flaw. "Reading between the lines" is much more interesting—and suggestive—than following the main plot. *Spies* has enough sensational source material—killer avalanches, a Yeti sighting, the seductive warmth of a radioactive generator at 20,000 feet—to leave *King Solomon's Mines* in the shade. Conboy's turgid prose is the soporific antidote to this "Boy's Own Adventure Story." Tangential figures and questionable omissions are what hold the reader's attention.

The most important issue that the book fails to address is the role of the U.S. National Security Agency

(NSA) role in the Himalayan sensor project. Kohli and Conboy believe that the plan was conceived during a Washington booze-session between General Curtis LeMay, the fire-eating head of the U.S. Strategic Air Command, and the American photographer cum adventurer Barry Bishop. It is a good yarn and LeMay (who probably served as the inspiration for Buck Turgidson in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*) was a colorful figure. The cocktail-genesis theory might even be true. However, the NSA did have a major interest. Monitoring and analyzing rocket telemetry has been the Agency's bread and butter since its establishment as America's signals intelligence (or "sigint") clearinghouse in 1952.[3] The NSA was an officially "unacknowledged" body during the 1960s; the old Beltway wheeze was that its initials stood for "no such agency." Today, thanks to the work of James Bamford, we know better. In *Spies* it remains ensconced in the shadows.

Finally, there are nagging questions about why the CIA chose to involve itself in the Himalayan mountaineering saga at all. Kohli and Conboy note that American intelligence (read NSA) used facilities in Pakistan to monitor Chinese missile launches until 1969. The first advanced Rhyolite spy satellite, which could do the job from space, was in orbit less than a year later (pp. 193-95). Thus, for the United States, placing sensors on Nanda Devi and other vertiginous peaks was redundant. This suggests a self-interested motive for the CIA's high-altitude shenanigans: with its Tibetan guerrilla program winding down, the Agency had no ongoing operations in south Asia (p. 149). A daring new clandestine scheme would keep the Washington mandarins happy and the tax dollars flowing. Historian Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones calls this instinct for "hyping" new threats a "con game" designed to win new resources from Congress.[4] There is

perhaps another, less invidious, *raison d'être* for the Himalayan project. Indian-American relations became increasingly frosty during the Johnson administration. In that context, maintaining ties with sympathetic figures in the Indian intelligence community, like Mullik, may have been worth the outlay for a mountaineering junket. It is conceivable that the whole endeavor was a secret PR exercise.

As a stand-alone narrative, *Spies in the Himalayas* leaves something to be desired. There are diverting vignettes, Kohli's wry sense of humor makes a few fleeting appearances, and the back-story stimulates important questions. Read in conjunction with Conboy's excellent historical monograph, *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet*, the book provides an effective introduction to America's Cold War campaign on the subcontinent. Yet the authors fail to generate the skin-prickling sense of high adventure that comes from challenging the limits of human endurance.

#### Notes

[1]. Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), pp. 32-33.

[2]. Those with an interest in Mullik and clandestine U.S.-Indian links should also refer to the spymaster's biography. B. N. Mullik, *Chinese Betrayal: My Years With Nehru* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1971).

[3]. Thomas Powers, *Intelligence Wars: American Secret History from Hitler to Al-Qaeda* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002), pp. 230-231.

[4]. Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *Cloak and Dollar: A History of American Secret Intelligence* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 2-9.

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