

Cold War Games: Spies, Subterfuge and Secret Operations at the 1956 Olympic Games

Harry Blutstein (Bonnier Publishing, Australia: Echo imprint, 2017), 348 pp., notes, bibliography, photographs, index.

Reviewed by Kevin Davies

Several books regarding Australia have made a welcome contribution to the intelligence and espionage literature recently. Books and articles on Australian contributions to COMINT and ELINT during World War II provided valuable insights to the intelligence war.^{a, b} Even topics like Australia's WWII contribution to camouflage and deception are beginning to receive attention.^c The trilogy of official history of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO—Australia's MI5) detailed ASIO's role in shaping and responding to events during the Cold War and beyond.^d Mark Aarons's *The Family File* (Black Inc, 2010) is an important adjunct to the official ASIO histories, presenting intelligence history from the perspective of one of its targets—leading Australian communists. Finally, Lance Collins and Warren Reed's *Plunging Point: Intelligence Failures, Cover-ups and Consequences* (Fourth Estate, 2005) provides a much-needed Australian perspective on intelligence theory, practice, and ethics.

The release of *Cold War Games: Spies, Subterfuge, and Secret Operations at the 1956 Olympic Games* by freelance journalist and adjunct professor at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology Harry Blutstein is well-timed, coinciding with revelations of the systemic, state-sponsored doping of athletes by the Russian gov-

ernment.^{e, f} Comparisons between the past and the present are inevitable and justifiable. Readers of this book will quickly find that there is much more.

While 1956 Melbourne Olympics were called the “friendly games,” this term, however, was but a thin veneer that covered a cauldron of international intrigue, crisis, and gamesmanship. Commencing in November, just weeks after the Suez invasion and the crushing of the Hungarian Uprising, the friendly games became an athletic battleground for countries to assert their superiority over one another, or to seek revenge for past (or present) injustices. Australia was not completely immune to this, as Blutstein points out, providing no more than a “bare ripple of applause” to Japanese athletes entering the Melbourne Cricket Group during the Opening Ceremony (xvi).

Blutstein provides an excellent account of how many nations used espionage and propaganda at the Games. Both the capitalist and communist nations saw them as an opportunity to display the inherent advantages of “their” sides and both attempted to exploit the opportunity for propaganda purposes. This occurred on multiple fronts—the United States vs. the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), East Germany and West Germany (even if they competed under the same flag), and, briefly, between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC, i.e., Taiwan)—and at all levels. An example of this is a small-scale and unplanned operation done by PRC journalist Zhang Chaoling, when he tricked an Australian soldier into raising the PRC flag during the 29 October 1956 flag-raising ceremony to honor the arrival of the Taiwanese advance party. (139–43) Fortunately for the organizers, the PRC's eventual boycott (one of

a. David Dufty, *The Secret Code-Breaks of Central Bureau: How Australia's Signals-Intelligence Network Helped Win the Pacific War* (Scribe, 2017).

b. Kevin Davies, “Australia's ELINT ‘Commandos’—Field Unit 12 Takes New Technology to War in the Southwest Pacific,” *Studies in Intelligence* 58, no. 3 (September 2014), 11–20; available online at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-58-no-3/pdfs-vol-58-no-3/KD-Aussie%20ELINT-WWII-withMaps-31August.pdf>.

c. Ann Elias, *Camouflage Australia: Art, Nature, Science, and War* (Sydney University Press, 2011).

d. *The Official History of ASIO* is comprised of three volumes, all of which are published by Allen and Unwin: David Horner, *The Spy Catchers* (2014); John Blaxland, *The Protest Years* (2015); and John Blaxland and Rhys Crawley, *The Secret Cold War* (2016).

e. Harry Blutstein, “About Harry,” *Harry Blutstein* blog, available online at <http://harryblutstein.com/about-harry>.

f. Benjamin Wittes, “To Understand Russian Election Interference, Start With This Movie About Doping,” *Lawfare* blog, available online at <https://www.lawfareblog.com/understand-russian-election-interference-start-movie-about-doping>.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

several) spared them of any further PRC-ROC antics. But there remained plenty of other opportunities for mischief.

Early chapters on the international events leading up to Games provide the reader with background that accounts for why the Games transpired the way they did, without getting bogged down in too much minutiae. Blutstein also provides political and personal perspectives—for example, he describes specific matches at a length appropriate to their relevance, and by doing so ensures that readers with more of an interest in the sporting aspect of the book are not left feeling unsatisfied.

There is an ample supply of intelligence operations and antics to keep the reader interested. Intelligence historians will invariably note that the name “Vasili Mitrokhin” appears occasionally, albeit not in an especially complimentary light. Those interested in Australian intelligence history will also be pleased to see that Eric Nave, a legend of cryptography, makes an appearance. The alcohol-induced headache given to ASIO by Vladimir Petrov—the KGB lieutenant colonel who defected to Australia in April 1954 after he was arrested for being drunk and disorderly while the Games were underway—provides an amusing example of the unexpected problems intelligence agencies have to face when dealing with defectors. (239–43) Continuing on the propaganda front, Blutstein recounts the United States Information Agency’s debacle that was *Sport in Art*, which unexpectedly found itself a victim of McCarthy-style smears. In this chapter, Blutstein provides a useful insight into the danger that ideologues pose to a democracy when they see the enemy everywhere or, worse, cynically exploit fear for their own base ends, to the detriment of the very rights that democracies claim are inalienable.

Amongst the intrigue, the book takes a refreshing detour into one of the enduring tropes—forbidden love. Taking the concept of the “friendly games” to the next level, the relationship between Czechoslovak discus thrower Olga Fiktová and American hammer thrower Harold “Hal” Connolly is treated with respect and dignity. Blutstein details the sort of obstacles people from different countries, different ideologies, and, in this case, different religions, face when they simply want to marry the person they love. The story of Olga and Hal would likely qualify as a modern fairytale, had the marriage not eventually ended in divorce in 1974.

The book has an easy-to-read journalistic style. The opening chapter, recounting the famous “blood in the water” polo semifinal between Hungary and the USSR draws the reader in with clear, concise language and the occasional droll one-liner that provides comic relief to the conflict and angst that surrounded the Games. While the book is well-referenced in the endnotes, the lack of direct links to specific sources is frustrating if the reader wishes to trace historical sources. Rather than a full bibliography, the book offers a selected reading list and web-link.

In conclusion, Blutstein deserves high commendation for *Cold War Games*. The book expands the study of Australia’s intelligence history beyond a parochial treatise on Australian intelligence agencies or operatives, and places these against a backdrop of fierce international competition and intrigue that only the Olympics can bring. It is a well-researched and well-told story that provides readers with a fascinating insight into international relations and the world of intelligence in the 1950s. The fortunate timing of its release makes the book a wonderful complement to the current intersection of the world of sport and espionage, and serves as a none-too-subtle reminder that history does tend to repeat itself.



The Reviewer: Kevin Davies works in the Australian Ministry of Defence. He completed a Master of Arts in Defence Studies from the Australian Defence Force Academy.