H-Diplo Article Review 1011

22 December 2020

Jason Colby. "Conscripting Leviathan: Science, Cetaceans, and the Cold War." *Diplomatic History* 44:3 (2020): 466-478. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhaa011.

https://hdiplo.org/to/AR1011
Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Dayna Barnes | Production Editor: George Fujii

Review by Kurk Dorsey, University of New Hampshire

Many of us who took United States (U.S.) diplomatic history courses as undergrads in the 1980s had the good fortune to be assigned *American Foreign Policy* as our textbook. Co-authors Thomas Paterson, J. Garry Clifford, and Kenneth Hagan balanced the need for brevity with an eye for telling details, some of which stick with me to this day. In thinking about this review, I pulled the 1983 edition off my shelf to refresh my memory of an anecdote about the author Robert Benchley, and found the precise quotation from his alleged attempt to wrestle with the challenges of writing about fisheries diplomacy, circa 1910: "This question has long been discussed from the American and British points of view, but has anyone considered the viewpoint of the fish?" While the line was clearly meant to be humorous, a century later historians were in fact thinking more about the fish. To the credit of the textbook authors, Benchley's story was one of ten references to fisheries listed in the index for the first volume.[1]

The story reminds us that there was a time when diplomatic historians took the oceans and their valuable living creatures very seriously, even if they did not attempt to read the minds of cod. That interest waned after World War II, as the Cold War swallowed up so much of the focus of historians of U.S. foreign relations. It is worth noting that the second volume (1986) of the same edition of *American Foreign Policy* has no index entries for fisheries or oceans. The environmental consequences of U.S. foreign policy continued to pile up around the world, but they had faded to insignificance in our histories.

As part of a special *Diplomatic History* forum on the oceans, Jason Colby's "Conscripting Leviathan: Science, Cetaceans, and the Cold War" reminds us that we should pay attention to the ways in which whales and their biological relatives were actors in the Cold War. While he does not pretend to write from the viewpoint of the whales, he takes seriously that they, as living, sometimes uncooperative beings, played a role in shaping policy. More important for the article, U.S. government efforts to understand the oceans as part of Cold War scientific research played out in unexpected ways in the formal and informal interactions between the United States and Soviet Union. As Colby sees it, even though the efforts to train cetaceans for military purposes never really panned out, those efforts did affect anti-whaling diplomacy in the 1970s and 1980s.

Colby's article draws rich details from interviews, historical and scientific secondary sources, press accounts, and military webpages. From these sources, he traces how the Office of Naval Research (ONR) developed an interest in dolphins and small whales from its work on sonar as a means of keeping an ear on Soviet submarines. Following in particular the lead of Dr. John Lilly, one of the first researchers to popularize the idea that dolphins were capable of communicating with one another and possibly with humans, the Navy opened a marine mammal program in California in 1962. As the Navy studied both acoustics and hydrodynamics, it began to conscript animals for all sorts of jobs, from modeling ways that submarines

[1] Thomas Paterson, *et al., American Foreign Policy*, vol. 1 (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1983), 100.

might move faster to picking up things from the bottom of the sea. Dolphin draftees were even put in harm's way in South Vietnam and the Persian Gulf to protect US coastal military bases.

Colby argues that the success of the Navy's various marine mammal programs caught the attention of the USSR, which instituted similar programs. After years of hunting dolphins in the Black Sea, in 1966 the USSR switched to protecting them and trying to tap them for military purposes. More than anything, the Soviets feared that U.S. efforts to train cetaceans would yield a breakthrough in the submarine race, which featured an endless game of hide-and-seek—trained dolphins might help the US Navy track Soviet vessels.

In the end, Colby argues that those of us who have written about the "Save the Whales" movement have underestimated the importance of the Navy's research in making that movement possible.[2] ONR programs helped to move many people from a utilitarian view of whales to seeing them as symbols of an environment in peril. Colby mentions in particular the platinum 1970 album, "Songs of the Humpback Whale," which included U.S. government recordings of whales from the sonar array, but more broadly he believes that the Navy's whole project of working with cetaceans seeded the public imagination: "Nearly all of the scientific reports and publications that activists drew upon to celebrate the intelligence and unique characteristics of whales and dolphins had been funded by the ONR" (475).

The Navy certainly did not intend to convince civilians that whales were special, much less sentient, but many people came to that conclusion anyway. At least since 1970 the Navy has frequently fought against treating whales as more special than fish, only to lose the PR battle repeatedly, whether during the earliest attempts to list whales as endangered species or during debates about testing sonar in ways that harm whales. Colby is persuasive that ONR research influenced the general public, but apparently it took longer to get up the ladder into the highest ranks of the Navy itself. Maybe the use of cetaceans is yet another example of the ways in which Cold War policies boomeranged on those who crafted them.

Colby's point about the work of the Navy researchers influencing the "Save the Whales" movement is well taken, and in fact Graham Burnett, whom Colby rightly cites favorably, made a similar argument in 2012.[3] Yet it is hard to know how far to take that point. The 1970 album, for instance, featured less than 50% content from naval arrays, with the rest from recordings by Roger and Katharine Payne, biologists who specialized in studying animal acoustics.[4] We probably cannot know, for instance, if the Paynes would have even thought to listen for humpback whale songs if they had not been clued in to the Navy's recordings. But in any case, as Burnett makes clear, other people who had listened to the recordings heard nothing special in them. Likewise, Colby notes that the U.S. Navy indirectly helped Greenpeace activists track the Soviet whaling fleet in the 1970s, although as Frank Zelko showed in wonderful detail, the first and most important interaction between Greenpeace and the Soviet whaling fleet was a product of serendipity and stoner mysticism. That 1975 encounter provided the lasting images of a Soviet harpoon flying over the heads of anti-whaling protestors and Paul Watson mourning on the corpse of a sperm whale. Only later did the Navy see an opportunity to harass Soviet whalers via protestors.[5]

These examples lead to my only substantive criticism of "Conscripting Leviathan," which is that it was too short. At thirteen pages it was the shortest of the four essays in the forum, hence there might have been room to elaborate on key

[2] Three recent books that address the movement are D. Graham Burnett, *The Sounding of the Whale: Science and Cetaceans in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Frank Zelko, *Make it a Green Peace: The Rise of Countercultural Environmentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Kurkpatrick Dorsey, *Whales and Nations: Environmental Diplomacy on the High Seas* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

[3] Burnett, 599, 628-6.31

[4] Details on the record *Songs of the Humpback Whale* can be found at Discogs https://www.discogs.com/Humpback-Whale-Songs-Of-The-Humpback-Whale/release/3583512, accessed 12 August 2014.

[5] Zelko, 215-216, 286; Burnett, 633-634.

points throughout, especially given the wonderful sources that Colby brings to light throughout the paper. Colby opens with a great moment, two U.S. scientists visiting the USSR in 1974 but ultimately being denied access to the most interesting locations of Soviet whaling science; as one said, the Soviets suspected them of being Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) assets. Colby concludes that in fact the two had "sought to gather intelligence during their visit" because a 1976 CIA report had "information that could only have been provided by the two men from their trip to the USSR" (476). More information about their intelligence gathering, or at least how the CIA used their trip, would make the case more convincing and perhaps shed light on the ways in which cetacean science was shaped by and shaped the Cold War.

Finally, Colby's title forces us to think anew about the subjects of his essay—the many animals that were conscripted to join the Navy. Pilot whales, orcas, bottlenose dolphins, and white-sided dolphins all became Navy property and probably even had serial numbers, because everything in the Navy has a serial number. Colby recounts the tale of a navy orca that just swam away during training near Hawaii. As Roger Payne concluded in 1995, many of these animals appeared to be escaping or, as he put it, going AWOL (Away without leave). Given that Payne, who knew whales as well as anybody, believed that they practiced "reciprocal altruism," it is surprising only that he did not call them conscientious objectors.[6] How much agency should we give these creatures, selected because of their intelligence but not always as malleable as their human trainers would like? Maybe Benchley was on the right track when he asked us to consider how the resources in the ocean view their exploitation.

Kurk Dorsey has taught environmental history and U.S. foreign relations at the University of New Hampshire since 1994. He is the author of *Whales and Nations: Environmental Diplomacy on the High Seas* (University of Washington Press, 2013) and is currently working on the U.S.-Soviet grain trade in the 1970s.

[6] Roger Payne, *Among Whales* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1995), 36, 266-267.