

Intelligence in Public Media

Betrayal in Berlin: The True Story of the Cold War's Most Audacious Espionage Operation

Steve Vogel, (Custom House, 2019), 530 pp., plates, illustrations, maps

Reviewed by Gary Keeley

Washington Post journalist Steve Vogel has done a service for everyone interested in the history of intelligence and the Berlin Tunnel, in particular, with his recently published book, *Betrayal in Berlin: The True Story of the Cold War's Most Audacious Espionage Operation*. Putting aside a discussion about how Vogel could know that the tunnel was the “most audacious espionage operation” the United States undertook between 1945 and 1991, the book, at 530 pages and with photos, maps and diagrams of the tunnel, reads like a thriller, reaches sources previously untapped, and revisits with clarity and insight aspects and individuals already known. Chapter 16, for example, paints pictures of many of those involved in Berlin, London, and Washington and is a page-turner, yet is but one of many chapters that read easily and impart accurate information. *Betrayal in Berlin* is reliable, exciting, well-sourced, and fair.

The Berlin Tunnel, a CIA-led operation, involved the digging in the mid-1950s of a tunnel 1,476 feet in length and six feet in diameter, from the western sector of Berlin across, or rather beneath, the dividing line and into the communist sector, where a CIA team tapped three communications cables that after extensive investigation with the help of CIA assets in East Berlin had been identified as the most lucrative. The collection operation lasted 11 months and 11 days during 1955–56 until it was discovered—accidentally, or so the KGB made it appear—on 22 April 1956. In fact, a KGB asset, British MI6 officer, George Blake—the “betrayal” in the book’s title—had passed detailed information to the KGB about the tunnel long before it was operational.

Vogel regales us with the stories of CIA Headquarters meetings and decisions and with the engineering and building of the tunnel and the team’s battles below-ground with noise, heat, clay, sewage and, later, with the danger of snow melting above tunnel-warmed soil. The story of the tunnel’s construction has been told many times, but this one may be the most riveting to date.

Vogel does not stop with a good retelling of the construction. His most significant contribution in *Betrayal in Berlin* is the addition of many new personal stories to the record of the planning, the dig, the processing, the collection, the KGB’s handling of Blake and the high-level decisions about the tunnel. While earlier books and articles about the Berlin Tunnel have included a number of interviews or been written by participants, Vogel gave particular attention to seeking out first-hand accounts. He interviewed about 40 participants in more than 60 separate interview sessions in the five years from 2014 through 2018.

Vogel conducted new interviews with key players George Blake and CIA officer Hugh Montgomery, who for decades has stood in as the CIA “voice” of the operation because its manager, Bill Harvey, was never interviewed. Vogel spoke with Montgomery on five separate occasions. Both Montgomery and Blake have spoken before, but Vogel gives each of them one last opportunity. Montgomery has since died and Blake, still living in Moscow where he fled after escaping from prison, is in his late 90s. One dares hope that Vogel will make available to researchers complete or edited versions of these transcripts because, both for those previously interviewed by earlier authors and those who spoke to Vogel for the first and perhaps only time, this collection of interviews is voluminous, unique and authoritative.

In a great many vignettes Vogel transports the reader back in time into rooms and meetings that, at the time, were extraordinarily sensitive. Though anecdotal, there is little reason to doubt the essential accuracy of Vogel’s accounts of what it was like to work as a transcriber of tunnel intercepts in Berlin or as an analyst in Washington DC. See in the index, for example, a subheading under “Berlin Tunnel project” the pages for “processing units.” (520) This reviewer delighted in traveling into once-sensitive rooms to watch them work (207–10) and would like more detail about what transpired in those sensitive spaces. The reader also attends the meetings between Blake and his KGB handler, Sergei Kondrashev, and

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experiences the KGB's HUMINT tradecraft. This is powerful material, and the book is filled with such stories that carry the narrative forward.

Between a third and a half of *Betrayal in Berlin* is about George Blake. Blake even dominates the book's title, assuming one does not read "betrayal" as what the tunnel team did. The book's title may carry a double meaning but that would not be an accurate characterization of the American activity. The tunnelers worked against an enemy; Blake betrayed his own, although he disingenuously always maintained that he could not have betrayed Britain because he never "belonged" in the first place. Counterintelligence professionals and psychologists may learn something new from this book about Blake's personality and rationalizations.

Vogel explores Blake's early life, his capture by the North Koreans during the Korean War, his turn against his country, his espionage activity, eventual exposure, arrest, trial, time in prison, and escape to Moscow. This story has been told before, including by Blake himself, but Vogel reveals many new details, such as the large volume of material Blake handed to the KGB that had nothing to do with the tunnel. The book does a good job explaining the Soviet imperative to protect Blake and explains how the Soviets decided that they had to allow the tunnel to operate to avoid a premature exposure that would bring suspicion on Blake.

The three best treatments of the tunnel before Vogel's were *Battleground Berlin: CIA vs. KGB in the Cold War*, by David E. Murphy, Sergei A. Kondrashev, and George Bailey in 1997; *Spies Beneath Berlin*, by David Stafford in 2002; and *Flawed Patriot: The Rise and Fall of CIA Legend Bill Harvey* by Bayard Stockton in 2006. Murphy and Kondrashev, as well as Stockton, were deeply involved in operations at the time, with Kondrashev providing the Soviet view. Retired CIA officer Tennent Bagley also published *Spymaster: The Astonishing Story of a Soviet KGB Officer* in 2014 with more of Kondrashev's memories about how and why the KGB protected Blake. Although these books were significant improvements on what was known about the tunnel prior to 1997, Murphy et al. devoted only a limited number of pages to the tunnel in their book. Stafford's book was slim, and Stockton's book saw the tunnel through Harvey's eyes in not many pages. Vogel's essential message about the tunnel does not differ markedly from these but greatly expands on them.

Readers should be aware also of the excellent article about the tunnel by Joseph C. Evans in 1996, just a year before *Battleground Berlin* was released. Evans, yet another CIA officer who worked the operation, corrected a number of earlier errors in his article, "Berlin Tunnel Intelligence: A Bumbling KGB," published in the *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* in its spring 1996 issue. The above-mentioned authors and Vogel all concur with Evans's brief review of the operation. Also worth reading are Vogel's acknowledgments (469–71) which reveal a host of reliable sources he knows and consulted.

In retrospect, it is remarkable that the first relatively complete and accurate treatment of the tunnel did not appear until 1997, 41 years after the tunnel was revealed to the world, and that a definitive version, if Vogel's can be called such, not until 2019, 63 years after the tunnel's exposure. Certainly, the tunnel was mentioned numerous times in earlier decades and articles were penned about the tunnel's engineering, but nothing before 1997 addressed all of the tunnel's aspects and did so free of the many factual errors seen earlier.

It is important to highlight—it may be that nobody has ever noticed or clearly stated this—that all four of these books on the tunnel rely for some of their information on the operation and almost all of their information about the "impact" and value of the tunnel's collection on an internal CIA history. *The Berlin Tunnel Operation 1952–1956*, published as a contribution to the Clandestine Services History Program (CSHP) history number 150. This only makes sense. CIA created and controlled tunnel-related records and the author of CSHP 150 had access to those records when writing the history. CSHP 150 was first released in 1977, with many redactions. Murphy et al. appear to have profited from a much less-redacted version in 1997, a version upon which Stafford may also have relied. Vogel will have read carefully Murphy et al., but he also had a more recently released version of CSHP 150. Vogel cites a version released in 2012.^a

a. The CIA released another slightly less redacted version in 2019, likely too late for Vogel. If anyone is keeping track, each time CIA released CSHP 150—1977, 1997, three times in 2007, 2012, and 2019—it did so with fewer redactions. Before 2007, only Murphy's 1997 restatement of CHSP's overview of the impact of the tunnel collection was available to public researchers, and it informed most published evaluations of the operation's value.

Among many small but important details in the book, Vogel correctly repeats *Battleground Berlin*'s contention that no "echo effect" existed that allowed CIA to read encrypted Soviet communications as if they had been transmitted in plain-text; Vogel simply does not mention it because it never happened. Vogel also appears to dismiss, again by its absence, the notion that Reinhard Gehlen, head of West German intelligence, was the instigator of the operation. In fact, he was not. Beyond not mentioning Gehlen, though, Vogel gives only a high-level view of how the tunnel operation originated. (20–21, 60–62)

More importantly, and beyond the many first-hand accounts Vogel offers, he agrees with and amplifies the arguments of most of the authors writing since 1996 that the Soviets did not deceive CIA with disinformation sent along the tapped circuits. Vogel, following Evans, Murphy et al., Stafford and Stockton, conclude that the Soviets did not attempt to send disinformation through the tunnel circuits because anything they tried would have alerted the Western listeners. Vogel discusses in several places the likelihood that the Soviets did not pursue a disinformation strategy because they wanted to protect Blake.^a (229–31)

For much of the 20th century following the arrest of George Blake in 1961 and the ensuing revelation that Blake had betrayed the tunnel to the KGB before the digging had even commenced, many authors assumed that the information collected had to have been disinformation because, of course, the Soviets would never have allowed accurate information, especially in such large volumes, to have been taken by the CIA. Critics saw the entire operation as folly. Vogel offers a brief and selective review of the Berlin-Tunnel-as-failure literature on pages

a. This reviewer found the scattered coverage of the important topic of disinformation on tunnel circuits confusing but understands that although Vogel has written a well-sourced work, it is a popular book that needs to flow. For those interested in pulling together the strands of Vogel's conversation about disinformation, these pages will be helpful: 127, 175–76, 214–15, 229–31, 255–57, 277–83, 308–309, 368–69, 445–47 and particularly 453–455. See also the index entry "disinformation" on page 516 of *Battleground Berlin*. On page 453 Vogel writes: "Together with other revelations in recent years, including declassified papers from the CIA, the NSA, and the Eisenhower and Kennedy presidential libraries, records from Blake's espionage trial in London, letters and papers related to Bill Harvey and the Berlin Operations Base compiled by Stockton, and interviews with key participants, the conclusion is inescapable that the vast majority of the intelligence was both genuine and taken as a whole, extremely valuable."

446–47 and captures the mood well while omitting many references to the tunnel in other works.

In fact, none of the 20th century authors knew whether or not the Soviets had used the tunnel to feed disinformation. They simply assumed it—or believed what the Soviets had Blake proclaim—and published it despite not having any declassified information from either the US or Soviet side to guide them to those conclusions. To this reviewer, such assumptions always stood out as red flags: How did the authors know? Did they understand the difficulty the Soviets would have encountered had they attempted wholesale disinformation over high-capacity communications circuits? Did authors not understand enough about espionage and counterintelligence to realize the risks to Blake that such an effort would have entailed? Such apparent "publishing failures" appear to say more about the lack of understanding of intelligence on the part of those authors than they do about what transpired. Disinformation may well have been transmitted, the recently released records and Kondrashev's testimony that the Soviets did not attempt disinformation notwithstanding, but, lacking more details, the final word on this may not yet have been written.

For the moment, the presentation by most recent authors, including Vogel, that the tunnel collected accurate information and not Soviet disinformation is a sea change from earlier decades when authors assumed the Soviets had outwitted the Americans. The current understanding is that the Soviets did not believe the tunnel's collection was significant. They believed, probably incorrectly, that allowing the tunnel to continue to collect would cost them little. They underestimated both the volume of communications the tunnel intercepted and the organizational and analytical skills within the CIA and NSA. Nevertheless, while the Soviets likely lost a massive amount of important information by allowing the tunnel to operate for almost a year, they kept suspicion away from Blake, as they intended, and gained five additional years in which Blake supplied the KGB large amounts of information from his post within MI-6.

Vogel is to be commended for using not only what primary source records he can find but for also knowing of and citing histories written by historians at CIA and NSA, who not only had the original primary source records to consult but understood how intelligence is practiced day-to-day, something too many observers

and critics of the Intelligence Community (IC) lack. Not only does Vogel cite the declassified CSHP 150, but also other histories by NSA historians that address the tunnel, although in each case, he might have used them more thoroughly, particularly the monograph by NSA specifically about the collection: *Operation REGAL: The Berlin Tunnel Operation*. Vogel also cites *American Cryptology During the Cold War* (by former NSA historian Thomas R. Johnson); and “Beyond BOURBON – 1948: The Fourth Year of Allied Collaborative COMINT Efforts Against the Soviet Union” (by former NSA historian Michael Peterson). Vogel also consults other less well-known but important IC sources. (478) When writing intelligence history, it is wise to read those who know with certainty what happened. Granted, REGAL and “BOURBON” were only declassified recently so were not available to earlier authors, but Vogel found them. He even located and cites a declassified *NSA Cryptologic Almanac* article about the careful tracking NSA undertook of East German police communications encrypted with the old Nazi Enigma machines. (211) This obscure newsletter item shows how SIGINT was used to alert the tunnel operators of police activity near the tap chamber and demonstrates how intelligence was practiced. His book is the better for the use of such internal IC sources.

This book is weak in only two places, the setup in chapter 1, “Black Friday”—the day in 1948 when the Soviet Union, thanks to William Weisband, another singleton KGB asset operating a decade before Blake, implemented numerous encryption changes and physical movements of channels and lines across almost all of its vast communications network to deny collection to US antennas and cryptanalysts—and in the discussion of the “impact” and value of the collection. Vogel follows other authors in declaring that VENONA was the primary casualty of Black Friday. In fact, VENONA was but a single collection program that intercepted, decrypted, and analyzed Soviet intelligence messages for primarily FBI counterintelligence activity. In addition to VENONA, lost also were most other encrypted Soviet communications—far more voluminous and more important than VENONA.

The US Army Security Agency (ASA) had developed access to Soviet communications after the Second World War, including the ability to decrypt several important and widely used Soviet cryptosystems. ASA’s successes had

the potential to equal in value the intercept and code-breaking successes against the Germans and Japanese during the war—a new or second ULTRA was within reach in the late 1940s and might have endured for years.

After Black Friday, NSA and CIA were no longer able to write reports and analyze communications because they could no longer collect the traffic, or if they could, they were no longer able to decrypt it. Vogel rightly describing it as “the worst intelligence loss in US history,” (16) something that may surprise readers of this periodical, and analysts, policymakers, and warfighters never benefited from what could have been a long-running SIGINT collection effort against multiple Soviet communications sources. But Vogel might have lingered a little longer over Black Friday to drive home the importance to the West of the tunnel collection in replacing what had been lost. He could have examined what else was lost beyond VENONA—declassified sources are available for that study—and emphasizing more what made the tunnel necessary in the first place. In those years, US leaders were essentially blind about Soviet plans and intentions. The tunnel resolved that, to a degree, but then it, too, was lost. For a hard hitting technical review of the damage Black Friday caused US intelligence, see *Code Warriors* by Stephen Budiansky (2016, pages 109–13).

The second weakness of *Betrayal in Berlin* is its incomplete examination of the “impact” and value of the collection. This is no fault of Vogel’s because the records only took him so far. Also, as with Vogel’s coverage of whether or not the Soviets used the tapped circuits to feed disinformation to CIA, this reviewer found it somewhat difficult to locate details and summaries of the value of the collection to US analysts and customers of intelligence. Vogel folds into his narrative all discussion about “impact.” For general readers, this works well but does not result in a detailed examination of what was collected and how it was used. That story remains to be told.

Steve Vogel has written the best book to date on the Berlin Tunnel. He stood on the shoulders of previous authors and brought all the pieces together, used the latest declassified sources, and added many new voices to the story. Readers will be grateful to him for capturing those voices. They are permanently memorialized in *Betrayal in Berlin*.



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