
REVIEWS

Peter Hayes, Lyuba Zarsky, and Walden Bello, *American Lake: Nuclear Peril in the Pacific*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1986. Pp. 529, maps, illustrations, appendixes. US\$6.95.

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The dominant focus of contemporary Pacific scholarship is on the islanders themselves, on the central events that have governed their lives over time. This is in marked contrast to an earlier (and imperial) historiography, which assumed that the only history worth recording began with European exploration dating from the sixteenth century, a vision that the current paradigm has effectively overturned. And its findings have been impressive, especially in the area of cross-cultural exchanges. The nature of commercial transactions, the spread of Christianity, and resistance to imperial authority take on new meaning once the islanders assume center stage. The end result has been to expand our awareness of the active role Pacific Islands people have played in the shaping of history.

The imperial perspective may be discredited, but one of its key assumptions nonetheless continues to pose problems for Pacific studies. The assumption is that power--technological and political--sets the context in which cultural negotiations have been (and are) worked out. W. H. Peterson understood the implications of this when he explored the nature of eighteenth-century contact in Tahiti. "European terror," an eighteenth-century version of gunboat diplomacy fashioned by Wallis and Bougainville, Cook and Banks, supplied the basis for "relations

between Europeans and Tahitians in the first ten years of contact." Indeed, only by the conscious policy of intimidation could the benign (if misleading) notion of a "mirage taiten" emerge among the salons of Paris and London. "Amiable as the Tahitians no doubt were," Peterson concluded, "their celebrated benevolence to the intruders was exacted at gunpoint."¹

Things have not changed much in the twentieth century. Although the current Pax Americana was exacted at an even heavier price--the deadly ramifications of gunpowder do not begin to compare to those of nuclear fusion, as the Bikini Islanders can attest--in either case the islanders' concerns are subordinated to the concerns of those whose power is greater. This is all the more difficult to accept given the region's intellectual assertion and political declaration of autonomy. And nowhere is this modern tension between independence and dependence more evident than in *American Lake: Nuclear Peril in the Pacific*, an extended exploration of the deployment of American nuclear might, its significance for the late-twentieth-century Pacific, and the means that might be employed to defuse this explosive situation.

This impressively researched book begins with a bang: "The superpowers are on the road toward nuclear war" (ix), the authors warn, a road that potentially leads straight to the Pacific. "Recent changes in superpower military strategy and force deployments make it as likely that World War III could break out in the Pacific as in Europe or the Middle East" (ix). How is it that the increased threat of nuclear war hangs so heavily over Oceania?

In "Manifest Destiny," the first of the book's three parts, authors Hayes, Zarsky, and Bello unravel U.S. nuclear strategy in the Pacific since World War II, from the administration of Harry Truman to that of Ronald Reagan. They argue that nuclear weapons quickly became an integral part of the U.S. arsenal in the Pacific precisely because the conventional military was so overextended, with bases stretching from the Northwest Pacific to Southeast Asia, from Australia to Hawaii. American dependence upon that nuclear firepower has clearly influenced its strategic designs for and political behavior in the Pacific. The authors, for example, trace U.S. involvement in Korea, the Taiwan Straits crisis of the late 1950s, and Vietnam, demonstrating time and again that America's need to project power and to defend what it has considered its lake has led it to become more entrenched in Island affairs, more convinced that only a nuclearized military could adequately defend the whole.

This historical evaluation is not as unique as *American Lake's* dust

jacket blurbs would have one believe; its findings depend less on “previously undisclosed and formerly classified Pentagon files” than on a wide range of previously published secondary sources. Nor is its handling of the ideological currents that swept through America at mid-century always deft. We are told, for instance, that in the late 1940s George Kennan and Harry Truman were responsible for moving the containment of communism “from ideology to policy” (27). Three pages later we find that containment has been elevated from “strategy to ideology” (30). What these terms mean and what the contradictory shifts signify are never delineated. These caveats aside, the overall analysis in “Manifest Destiny” provides a context for the contemporary situation, explored in the book’s second section, “Pacific Arsenals.”

And it is here that the book makes a major contribution. The authors provide an in-depth survey of American forces in the Pacific, a survey that begins with a careful reconstruction of the “deadly connection” between conventional and nuclear forces, making it plain that the two cannot be thought of as separate components. Additional chapters detail the ways in which “the vast, multi-service U.S. arsenal is welded together into a unified structure--the Pacific command” (153). This command oversees the deployment of more than three hundred thousand troops in an area encompassing nearly half the earth’s surface, a deployment superbly illustrated in the various maps and charts that supplement the text. To hold this vast empire together requires a sophisticated ground and satellite communications network, and again *American Lake’s* treatment of this so-called invisible arsenal is comprehensive. No less so is its analysis of the U.S. missile test ranges, its depiction of the various alliances with Pacific nations that enable the U.S. to establish a line of forward deployment, and its coverage of the controversial Tomahawk cruise missile. On this issue, the authors pull no punches: “More than just another weapon system in America’s nuclear arsenal, the cruise missile changes the capabilities of U.S. forces in ways that are new and fraught with hazard. With deployment of the sea-launched Tomahawk cruise missile, the number of ships in the Pacific Fleet which can launch a nuclear land-attack strike will increase from five in 1984 to about fifty in 1990, perhaps raising the tempo for nuclear war by the same ratio” (253). Its sustained analysis and provocative insights, when combined with its welter of detail and synthetic quality, make “Pacific Arsenals” a veritable handbook for students of the U.S. agenda in the Pacific.

Comprehensive, *American Lake* is also controversial, especially in two respects. The first of these concerns its limited coverage of the role

of the Soviet Union in Pacific affairs; only two of the book's twenty chapters explicitly focus on the Soviet presence. This is partly due to the nature and amount of evidence available: The authors acknowledge that they were unable to obtain classified Soviet documents but could secure American ones, access to which they obtained through the "uniquely democratic U.S. Freedom of Information Act" (xii), a difference that obviously influenced the balance of the book's coverage.

But the Soviet threat is downplayed for another reason. Hayes, Zarsky, and Bello do not believe that the U.S.S.R. poses the same kind of threat that the United States represents. They argue that on the basis of the best available estimates of Soviet military capabilities, some of which come from U.S. intelligence sources, the Soviets can only mount a defensive posture in the Far East. Its navy, for example, is bottled up in Vladivostok and Petroslovak, and its surface vessels and submarines perform so poorly that their task is simply to protect sea-lanes (293-308). The only offensive threat the Soviets pose, in sum, is in the vivid imaginations of U.S. military strategists, State Department officials, and White House politicians.²

This revision is instructive, suggesting that the United States tends to project its own aggressive tendencies on other nations, a point reinforced by the epigrams that the authors have selected to head various chapters. "In the Pacific, as in all other areas of the world, our greatest threat remains the Soviet Union," Admiral William Crowe, former commander-in-chief of the Pacific, declared in 1985 (291). His bellicose and hardline approach is in sharp contrast to the benign stance of A. Sidorenko, a Soviet military analyst, who observed that "nuclear weapons should not be thrown around like hand-grenades" and Leonid Brezhnev's declaration that "we will never be the first to let such weapons fly" (323). The implication is that, unlike the United States, the Soviet Union is not only incapable of establishing an offensive deployment, but is unwilling to do so.

Such reticence flies in the face of the historic thrust of Russian and Soviet expansion since the seventeenth century, and is contradicted by the increasing number of its missile tests in the northern Pacific, particularly in the summer of 1987, one of which flew over the Hawaiian Islands. That provocative demonstration at once should make one wary of Gorbachov's much-ballyhooed Vladivostok peace initiative and should remind us that the Soviets are no less imperial than the Americans, a combination that poses a double threat to the Pacific peoples.

Can Oceania liberate itself from its imperiled position? The authors believe so and in the third section of their book, "Charting a New

Course," they lay out their solution, one that will also generate some controversy.

Their ultimate goal is a nuclear-free Pacific and, by extension, the demise of the American lake. The first stage in this transformation "will require separating and disengaging of superpower nuclear forces" (10-11). They recognize, of course, that this can only be accomplished by the withdrawal of such forces from the region, something neither power will accept. "Left to their own devices," Hayes et al. contend, "the Cold Warriors in Washington and Moscow are unlikely to cede an inch of their nuclear deployments or spheres of influence" (402). This situation will change only if regional allies exert pressure upon the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. to change their positions, and this is the point of entry for the grass-roots, antinuclear political movements that have emerged since the 1970s to challenge the development of a nuclearized Pacific. In concert these forces could (and should) work to establish nuclear-free zones in Korea and Japan, China and the Philippines. Movements in smaller, less powerful states could also play an important role by protesting the right of the United States to use their islands as staging areas "for naval-nuclear warfare in the Pacific and Indian Oceans" (404). For Australia, tightly bound up in its obligations to the American war machine, the authors have a special plea-- to act quickly, to break from ANZUS and, by "going it alone," to compel "the U.S. to choose whether it is committed to arms control or to nuclear superiority" (420).

In various ways, then, this "people's diplomacy" may hold the key to regional disarmament and, more broadly, to sheer survival itself. The authors make Vanuatu Prime Minister Walter Lini's rhetoric their own: "It is a matter of life and death . . . that our Pacific Ocean be declared a nuclear free zone. . . . On this crucial issue there can be no retreat. If we continue to deny ourselves any decision on this, our children of tomorrow will condemn us, and it will be a condemnation we will have deserved" (406). In the classic pattern of reform literature, *American Lake* casts a harsh light on a question of vital importance and then provides the means of salvation through a stirring promise of the efficacy of personal, direct action.

Not all will be so swayed. *Foreign Affairs*, in a brief review of *American Lake*, called its analysis "alarmist" and its solutions "simplistic."³ It would. But there are points at which one suspects that the book is designed to generate the very coherent and forceful political movement that by implication it must presume exists already; in this sense art precedes life. Still, to dismiss it at that would be a mistake, for the proposed strategy for negotiation, for creating a peaceful Pacific, is not only

clever but has a historical basis. It recalls the shrewd maneuverings of those eighteenth-century Tahitians who, when confronted with the superior military muscle of the British navy in the first years of contact, managed to wage peace under the shadow of the cannon (and send the navy on its way). The present struggle will be more protracted, the chances for success less certain, as the recent deletion of antinuclear provisions in Belau's constitution--deletions purchased by American largess--suggest. But this only heightens the drama and intensifies the debate. "The time to avert the nuclear peril in the Pacific is now," Hayes et al. conclude, "not when a nuclear war is upon us" (389).

American Lake is a provocative book, but it is surprisingly passionless. That is in part because its cumulative detail overwhelms one's emotional response, though such data are absolutely crucial to make the political case for demilitarizing the Pacific. It is as well a result of the book's flat, unimaginative language. It seeks to evoke an impassioned reaction, for example, through a vocabulary that is overloaded with such words as "frenzy" and "peril"; similarly, chapter 19, "Nuclear Epitaph?" is a leaden fantasy of how a nuclear war might erupt. Things could have been different. When, for instance, the authors discuss the *Starfish* test, a 1.4-megaton atmospheric explosion in July 1962, they give an accurate, straightforward account of its destructive capacity, but none of the eye-witness reactions that would have induced empathy and political outrage (240). One has to turn to *Life* magazine, of all places, to get an idea of the chill that swept through the crowd gathered on Honolulu's beaches eight hundred miles away to witness the explosion. Initially blinded when night flashed into day, one of them, correspondent Dick Stolley, wrote that the sky "turned almost instantly to a bright, bilious green, a color so unexpected that the watchers on the beach gasped." As they gaped, the drama continued to unfold: "Great green fingers of light poked out and through the clouds. From the center of the blast, a red glow began expanding upward . . . a deep solid red, and the people afterwards groped for words to describe it." One who so groped declared that it was "as if someone had poured blood on the sky." The stain on the nation's conscience was real enough: It is no coincidence that the Atmospheric Test Ban Treaty was ratified within the next year.⁴

That is how I wish *American Lake* would have moved me, much as did E. P. Thompson's far shorter *Beyond the Cold War* (New York, 1982), a brilliant and engaged analysis of the tensions that Europeans feel living under the threat of nuclear Armageddon. I recognize that it is unfair to ask the authors to write a different book, and yet there remains the question of its effectiveness as a polemic, for that it is. Yes, it

is a consciously designed assault upon political orthodoxy. Yes, it is at times a penetrating critique of the American empire, teaching us much about its military strength and political impact. Yes, it seeks to break the Pacific out of its dependency and to set out the means to full-fledged independence. But whether the book will transcend its pedagogic character, and truly inspire and galvanize its audience, is another matter. Time will tell.

NOTES

1. W. H. Peterson, "European Intimidation and the Myth of Tahiti," *Journal of Pacific History*, 1969: 199, 216-217.

2. Research commissioned by the U.S. State Department reached similar conclusions about Soviet penetration in the South Pacific; see Robert C. Kiste and R. A. Herr, "The Potential for Soviet Penetration of the South Pacific Islands: An Assessment," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, April-June 1986: 42-60. Significantly, Kiste and Herr conclude that "the most concrete instances of [Soviet] opportunity have occurred as a result of controversy that could be seen as generated by the western nations themselves" (56). That would, of course, include U.S. disregard of nuclear-free zones, of island sovereignty.

3. *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1987: 1118.

4. *Life*, 20 July 1962, 26-28. See also Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (New York, 1985).