

Watching; Waiting
ongoing performance
on a circa 1965 Russian submarine
in Providence, RI
as part of the Juliett 484 project,
a Polish/US exchange project
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The presence of a Cold War era Russian submarine in Providence, RI, seems to go unnoticed. It is a recent arrival, and has been open to the public as a museum for only a year. It is a short walk from the center of the city, but immediately you are at the edge of an older harbor, quiet, not fully redesigned for the public, seemingly out of the way. Is that what we think of the Cold War as well? We seem to have forgotten its lessons in this new War on Terrorism.

In preparation for this performance, I took several tours of the submarine. While the tours can be self guided, the signage is minimal within the ship. The more interesting tours are run by volunteers. Each of them supplied different information, highlighted different aspects of the history of the submarine, based on their own interests and study. One guide took us into the depths of the ship, normally off limits to the public, including the control room for launching the nuclear warheads.

I went online to find books on Russian submarines, and located an interesting collection. I read books on post-war Soviet Naval strategy, as analyzed by the US Navy. I found picture books of Soviet submarines. I also read the memoirs of submarine duty by Soviet Rear-Admiral I. Kolyshkin, Submarines in Arctic Waters (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966).

The cabin in the submarine that attracted my attention was that of the political officer, who was a member of the KGB. Different kinds of information was relayed about this cabin: it was the only one that could be locked; that there was a connection to the ship's ventilation system to which cyanide capsules could be attached, in the event of capture; that the political officer watched the members of the crew, including the officers; that the political officer was the only one in contact with Moscow, and that he alone communicated their orders to the captain. All of the comments aligned with my Cold War Hollywood images of the KGB...

But Rear-Admiral Kolyshkin's memoirs provided another perspective. Central to the book is his heartfelt and unquestioning patriotism, "I would, without hesitation, sacrifice my life for my country, for the Communist Party, because without country and without the Party life would be meaningless to me. For it was my country and the Party that had turned me from a semi-literate river seaman into a naval officer, into the commander of a unit, and brought me to the forefront of the struggle against the enemy. My country's destiny was my destiny." (p. 120) Change only a few words, and it could be written by his peer in the US Navy.

Even more challenging to my image of the KGB were his descriptions of the Political Department of the Russian Navy, which supplied the Political Officer for each submarine. "The new Political Department adopted the best traditions of its predecessor. One was the maxim: "Work with all and each and everyone." This meant combining collective education with work with individuals.... The crew of a submarine were the unit for which lectures, reports and meetings were arranged. ... The Political Department thoughtfully approached every aspect of raising the level of the submariners' political, tactical and special knowledge." (p. 163-164)

Propaganda? Propaganda. The definition is neutral: “the systematic propagation of a given doctrine or of allegations reflecting its views and interests.” In practice, however, it has negative connotations. It is something that the Other, the Enemy, generates. They successfully impose it on their own people, and they attempt to impose it on us as well, though we are more successful at resisting its falsehoods...

Propaganda... I can't help but think of President Bush, his War on Terrorism, and the Alerts and Advisories of our own Department of Homeland Security.

The performance that I created conflated the two worlds, in an attempt to question old and new ideologies.

Severely dressed in a black jumpsuit, my hair in two braids circling my head, I positioned myself at the desk in the Political Officer's cabin. This meant that my back was to the door to the passageway through which the audience would walk.

Above my head, directed toward the doorway, was a mirror, which allowed me to see who was standing in the doorway behind me. On the desk was a small video monitor, whose camera was positioned outside the room to allow me to see who was coming along the passageway.

Also on the desk were several books, including the House Committee on Un-American Activities' Facts on Communism (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1961) and Guide to Subversive Organizations and Publications (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1961); Guide to the Soviet Navy (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1970) translated from the German guide of 1964; and the late-produced Soviet Submarine Recognition Guide (Washington, D.C.: Defense Intelligence Agency and Naval Technical Intelligence Center, 1989).

Directly outside the door was a column on which I mounted a small video monitor that faced the passageway. On that monitor was my eye, looking at them as they came down the hallway.

Whispering into a microphone whose speakers were in the passageway, I read the current Advisories and Alerts of the US Department of Homeland Security. I did a straight reading of the material, with no irony, no questions. Reading the texts for three and four hours straight, the information took on more and more authority, creating a paranoid world of its own making.

Coming down the passageway, the audience first encountered my voice, whispering, reading. On both sides of the passage were small officers cabins and a dining area/operating table at which they could sit to listen to the text. It was not until they moved further along the passage that they became aware of the eye watching them, and finally of me sitting in the cabin, reading, speaking live. As they stood looking past the partially closed door, they might encounter direct eye contact with me via a mirror placed over the desk. It was only then that they also became aware of the small video screen on the desk that was monitoring the passageway through which they had just come.

Only one audience person dared to enter the cabin to examine the books, though several were bold enough to push open the sliding door. Few lingered when I looked at them through the mirror.

I assumed that the viewers' would carry the same preconceptions of the Cold War that I have. I have no doubt that audience members initially thought that I was reading some kind of circa 1965 Russian political propaganda. Combined with the location on this historic submarine, this fostered a

nostalgic recreation of the illusions of that era, so that an initial response to the texts, from that vantage point, was one of condescending judgement/rejection based on an assumption of the superiority of our own ideology. The shock occurred as the audience continued to listen to the text, realizing that not only was it contemporary, but generated by our own government. Suddenly the rules were reversed, what was wrong is right, who was evil is good.

Does that change one's perspective on the Cold War? Does it impact one's understanding of Bush's War on Terrorism? Both questions warrant consideration.