

H-Net Reviews

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Eric Gottfrid Swedin, ed. *Survive the Bomb: The Radioactive Citizen's Guide to Nuclear Survival*. Minneapolis: MBI Pub. Co. and Zenith Press, 2011. 186 pp. \$17.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7603-4031-8.



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After the initial dropping of the bomb on Japan, the American public came to terms with the nuclear genie it let out of the bottle. While the period of soul searching would largely end alongside America's nuclear monopoly on August 29, 1949, when the Soviets successfully tested their first atomic weapon, the American government, at various levels, had to devise a way to survive what it perceived as the coming nuclear conflict with the USSR. It is this world into which Eric G. Swedin transports his reader. Swedin's book *Survive the Bomb: The Radioactive Citizen's Guide to Nuclear Survival* utilizes primary source material, mostly government-issued reports and educational material, to give the reader a glimpse of the culture of American civil defense in the nightmare of the nuclear age. Ultimately, Swedin believes that nuclear culture, a piece of the 1950s that, he believes, is far too often underassessed in cultural studies of the decade, is as critical to understanding the decade as anything else.

Swedin divides his sources into three categories: sources dealing with the federal Civil Defense Administration's attempts to organize a proper response to a nuclear attack at the municipal level, sources dealing with personal nuclear attack preparedness, and a report to Congress on a theoretical Soviet nuclear strike. Go-

ing beyond the ever familiar duck-and-cover cartoons, these sources point to the myriad of ways the federal government attempted to prepare the American populace to survive a potential nuclear attack. For such an all-threatening event, every preparation had to be made for as many individuals as possible, including instruction cards that the average person on the street could fit in a wallet or purse, a guide to preparing and stocking a fallout shelter, a way for those inside to know when it would be safe to reemerge and attempt to reconstruct society, and even a comic book to relate it all to children. As Swedin points out, a potential nuclear attack represented more than a far-off existential threat, but rather a very real possibility to which the American government, on every level, devoted extensive time and resources to prepare for. The sources, ultimately, provide a window into a world in which atoms for war was just as much a reality as atoms for peace.

These facsimile sources are interspersed with anecdotes—some serious, others uproarious—about the nuclear age that produced them. While the book has many successes, including bringing to the mass market sources that would otherwise be much harder to locate, the interspersion of these anecdotes, often in the middle of sources, can prove just as much a distraction (not

to mention the blue, nuclear iconography-filled paper stock on which the text is printed) as an educational tool. That said, Swedin's limited presentation of paratextual material and use of facsimile rather than edited sources allows the reader to conduct a closer reading of the primary sources than otherwise.

Ultimately, Swedin believes that the greatest legacy of the American civil defense movement in the early decades of the nuclear age is the need to ban the bomb. Swedin perceives an inability among his students to see

the umbrella of terror created by the MAD-induced standoff between the superpowers (p. 180). In many ways, Swedin is writing not just about the culture of cruelty the Cold War engendered, but against the lack of enthusiasm the current culture bears towards assessing the necessity of and the movement towards ever more efficient and larger stockpiles of nuclear weapons. In short, Swedin's collection of documents provides a good, albeit brief, source for both the veteran of nuclear studies and the uninitiated looking for insight into the world of nuclear fear in the 1950s.

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