

The US Destroyed the Nord Stream Pipeline. Interview with Seymour Hersh

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Last week, renowned investigative reporter Seymour Hersh published an article claiming that the US was responsible for the destruction of the Nord Stream pipeline transporting natural gas to Germany from Russia. He spoke to Jacobin about the allegations.

On September 26, 2022, the Nord Stream natural gas pipeline from Russia to Germany was largely destroyed by several explosions in the Baltic Sea. Last week, the award-winning investigative reporter Seymour Hersh published an [article](#), based on information from a single anonymous source, arguing that the Biden administration and the CIA were responsible.

Hersh won the Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for the role he played in breaking the story of the Mỹ Lai massacre, an incident in which US soldiers killed between three and five hundred unarmed civilians. He spoke to Fabian Scheidler for Jacobin about the allegations he made in his most recent article and the influence that the CIA and the national security state has on American foreign policy.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: Please start to lay out your findings in detail. What happened precisely according to your source, who was involved, and what were the motives behind it?

SEYMOUR HERSH: What I've done is simply explain the obvious. It was just a story that was begging to be told. In late September of 2022, eight bombs were supposed to go off; six went off under the water near the island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea, in the area where it is rather shallow. They destroyed three of the four major pipelines in the Nord Stream 1 and 2.

Nord Stream 1 has been feeding gas fuel [to Germany] for many years at very low prices. And then both pipelines were blown up, and the question was why, and who did it. On February 7, 2022, in the buildup to the war in Ukraine, the president of the United States,

Joe Biden, at a [press conference](#) at the White House with German chancellor Olaf Scholz, said that we can stop Nord Stream.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: The exact wording from Joe Biden was “If Russia invades, there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2, we will bring an end to it.” And when a reporter asked how exactly he intended to do it, given that the project was within the control of Germany, Biden just said, “I promise we will be able to do it.”

SEYMOUR HERSH: His under secretary of state, Victoria Nuland, who was deeply involved in what they call the [Maidan Revolution](#) in 2014, used similar language a couple of weeks earlier.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: You say that the decision to take out the pipeline was taken even earlier by President Biden. You lay out the story from the beginning, chronologically from December 2021, when the national security advisor Jake Sullivan convened, according to your piece, a meeting of the newly formed task force from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CIA, the State and the Treasury departments. You write, “Sullivan intended for the group to come up with a plan for the destruction of the two Nord Stream pipelines.”

SEYMOUR HERSH: This group initially was convened in December to study the problem. They brought in the CIA and so on; they were meeting in a very secret office. Right next door to the White House, there’s an office building that’s called the Executive Office Building. It is connected underground through a tunnel. And at the top of it is a meeting place for a secret group, an outside group of advisors called the President’s Intelligence Advisory Board. I only reported that to let the people in the White House know that I do know something. The meeting was convened to study the problem: What are we going to do if Russia is going to war? This is three months before the war, before Christmas of 2022. It was a high-level group; it probably had a different name, I just called it the “interagency group” — I don’t know the formal name, if there was one. It was the CIA and the National Security Agency, which monitors and intercepts communications; the State Department and the Treasury Department, which supplies money; and probably a few other groups that were involved. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had representation as well.

The big task they had was to give recommendations about what to do about stopping Russia, measures that are either reversible, like more sanctions and economic pressure, or irreversible, kinetic things — exploding things, for example. I don’t want to talk specifically about any particular meeting because I have to protect my source. I don’t know how many people were at the meeting, do you understand what I mean?

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: In the article, you wrote that, in early 2022, the CIA working group reported back to Sullivan’s interagency group and they said, “We have a way to blow up the pipelines.”

SEYMOUR HERSH: They did have a way. There were people there who understood what we call in America “mine warfare.” In the United States Navy, there are groups that go into submarines — there’s also one command about nuclear engineering — and there is a mining command. Underground mining is very important, and we have skilled miners. Probably the most important place for training miners is in this little resort town called Panama City in the middle of nowhere in Florida. We train very good people there and we use them. Miners are very important. You get clogged entries into ports; they can blow up things in the way. If we don’t like a certain country’s underwater pipelines for oil, we can blow them up too. It’s not always good things they do but they’re very secretive. For the group at the White House, it was clear they could blow up the pipelines. There’s an explosive called C-4, which is incredibly powerful, devastating particularly with the amount they use. You can control and

operate it remotely with underwater sonar devices. They send very low-frequency signals.

So it was possible, and they told the White House that, by early January, because two or three weeks later, Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland said we can do it. I think this was January 20. And then the president as well, with Olaf Scholz, said on February 7 that we could do it. Scholz said nothing specific; he was vague. But a question that I would ask Scholz, if I had a parliamentary hearing, is this: Did President Biden tell you about this? Did he tell you at that time why he was so confident he could blow it up? We didn't have a plan yet, but we knew we had the capability to do it.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: What role did Norway play in the operation?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, Norway is a great seaman nation, and they have underground energy. They're also very anxious to increase the amount of natural gas they can sell to Western Europe and Germany. And they have done that, they've increased their export. So, for economic reasons, why not join with the United States? They also have a residual dislike of Russia.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: In your article, you write that the Secret Service and the navy of Norway were involved, and you say that Sweden and Denmark were sort of briefed but not told everything.

SEYMOUR HERSH: The way it was put to me is: if you didn't tell them, you didn't need to tell them. In other words, you were doing what you were doing, and they knew what you were doing and they understood what was going on, but maybe nobody ever said yes. I worked on that issue very much with the people I was talking to. The bottom line is, to do this mission, the Norwegians had to find the right place. The divers that were being trained in Panama City could go to three hundred feet underwater without a heavy diving tank, only a mixture of oxygen and nitrogen and helium. The Norwegians found us a place off Bornholm island in the Baltic that was only 260-feet deep so they could operate. They would have to return slowly. There was a decompression chamber, and we used the Norwegian submarine hunter.

Only two divers were used for the four pipelines. One problem was how to deal with those people who monitor the Baltic Sea. It is very thoroughly monitored, and there's a great deal of openly available information, so we took care of this; there were three or four different people for that. And what we then did is really simple.

Every summer for twenty-one years, our navy Sixth Fleet, which has control of the Mediterranean and also the Baltic Sea, has an exercise for NATO navies in the Baltic (BALTOPS). And we'd bring a navy carrier or large ships around. It was a very open thing. The Russians certainly knew about it. We did publicity. And in this one, for the first time in history, the Baltic Sea NATO operation had a new program. It was going to have an exercise in dropping mines and finding mines for ten or twelve days.

Several nations sent out mining teams, and one group would drop the mine and another mining group from their country would go hunt and blow it up. So you had a period where there are things blowing up, and in that time the Norwegians could recover deep-sea divers. The two pipelines run about a mile apart; they're under the dirt a little but they're not hard to get to, and they had practiced this. It didn't take more than a few hours to plant the bombs.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: So this was in June 2022?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Yes, they did it around ten days into June, at the end of the exercise, but

at the last minute the White House got nervous. The president said he's afraid of doing it. He changed his mind and gave them the order that he wanted the right to bomb anytime, to set the bombs off anytime remotely by us. You do it with just a regular sonar, actually a Raytheon build.

You fly over and drop a cylinder down. It sends a low-frequency signal — you can describe it as a flute sound tone, you can make different frequencies. But the worry was that one of the bombs, if left in the water too long, would not work, and two did not — they only got three of the four pipelines. So there was a panic inside the group to find the right means, and we actually had to go to other intelligence agencies that I didn't write about.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: And so what happened then? They placed it, they found a way to control it remotely . . .

SEYMOUR HERSH: Joe Biden decided not to blow them up. It was in early June, five months into the war, but then, in September, he decided to do it. I'll tell you something. The operational people, the people who do kinetic things for the United States, they do what the president says, and they initially thought this was a useful weapon that he could use in negotiations. But at some point, once the Russians went in, and then when the operation was done, this became increasingly odious to the people who did it. These are well-trained people; they are in the highest level of secret intelligence agencies. They turned on the project. They thought this was an insane thing to do. And within a week, or three or four days after the bombing, after they did what they were ordered to, there was a lot of anger and hostility. This is obviously reflected in the fact that I'm learning so much about it. And I'll tell you something else. The people in America and Europe who build pipelines know what happened. I'm telling you something important. The people who own companies that build pipelines know the story. I didn't get the story from them but I learned quickly they know.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: Let's go back to this situation in June last year. President Joe Biden decided not to do it directly and postponed it. So why did they do it then in September?

SEYMOUR HERSH: The secretary of state, Anthony Blinken, said a few days after the pipeline was blown up, at a news conference, that a major economic and almost military force was taken away from Vladimir Putin. He said this was a tremendous opportunity, as Russia could no longer weaponize the pipelines — meaning that it was not able to force Western Europe not to support the United States in the war. The fear was that Western Europe would not go along any longer in the war. I think that the reason they decided to do it then was that the war wasn't going well for the West, and they were afraid with winter coming. The Nord Stream 2 has been sanctioned by Germany, and the United States was afraid that Germany would lift the sanctions because of a bad winter.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: According to you, what were the motives when you look behind the scenes? The US government was opposed to the pipeline for many reasons. Some say they were opposed to it because they wanted to weaken Russia, to weaken the ties between Russia and Western Europe, Germany especially. But maybe also to weaken the German economy, which, after all, is a competitor to the US economy. With the high gas prices, enterprises have started to move to the United States. So what's your sense of the motives of the US government, if they blew up the pipeline?

SEYMOUR HERSH: I don't think they thought it through. I know this sounds strange. I don't

think that Blinken and some others in the administration are deep thinkers. There certainly are people in the American economy who like the idea of us being more competitive. We're selling LNG, liquefied gas, at extremely big profits; we're making a lot of money on it. I'm sure there were some people thinking, boy, this is going to be a long-time boost for the American economy. But in that White House, I think the obsession was always reelection, and they wanted to win the war, they wanted to get a victory, they want Ukraine to somehow magically win. There could be some people who think maybe it'll be better for our economy if the German economy is weak, but that's crazy thinking. I think, basically, that we've bitten deep into something that's not going to work. The war is not going to turn out well for this government.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: How do you think this war could end?

SEYMOUR HERSH: It doesn't matter what I think. What I know is there's no way this war is going to turn out the way we want, and I don't know what we're going to do as we go further down the line. It scares me if the president was willing to do this. And the people who did this mission believed that the president did realize what he was doing to the people of Germany, that he was punishing them for a war that wasn't going well. And in the long run, this is going to be very detrimental not only to his reputation as the president but politically too. It's going to be a stigma for America. So what you have is a White House that thought it may have a losing card: Germany and Western Europe may stop giving the arms we want and the German chancellor could turn the pipeline on — that was always a fear. I would be asking a lot of questions to Chancellor Scholz. I would ask him what he learned in February when he was with the president. The operation was a big secret, and the president wasn't supposed to tell anybody about this capability. But he does talk. He says things that he doesn't want to. Your story was reported in Western media with some restraint and criticism. Some attacked your reputation or said that you have only one anonymous source, and that's not reliable.

SEYMOUR HERSH: How could I possibly talk about a source? I've written many stories based on unnamed sources. If I named somebody, they'd be fired, or, worse, jailed. The law is so strict. I've never had anybody exposed, and of course when I write I say, as I did in this article, it's a source, period. And over the years, the stories I've written have always been accepted. I have used for this story the same caliber of skilled fact-checkers as had worked with me at the *New Yorker* magazine. Of course, there are many ways to verify obscure information told to me. And, you know, a personal attack on me doesn't get to the point. The point is that Biden chose to keep Germany cold this winter. The president of the United States would rather see Germany cold [because of energy shortages] than Germany possibly not supportive in the Ukraine war, and that, to me, is going to be a devastating thing for this White House. For me, and I think also for the people on the mission, it was appalling.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: The point is also that it can be perceived as an act of war not only against Russia but against Western allies, especially Germany.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Let's keep it simple. I can tell you that the people involved in the operation saw the president as choosing to keep Germany cold for his short-range political goals, and that horrified them. I'm talking about American people that are intensely loyal to the United States. In the CIA, it's understood that, as I put it in my article, they work for the Crown, they don't work for the Constitution. The one virtue of the CIA is that a president, who can't get his agenda through Congress and nobody listens to him, can take a walk in

the backyard of the Rose Garden of the White House with the CIA director and somebody can get hurt eight thousand miles away. That's always been the selling point of the CIA, which I have problems with. But even that community is appalled that he chose to keep Europe cold in support of a war that he's not going to win. And that, to me, is heinous.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: You said in your article that the planning of the attack was not reported to Congress, as is necessary with other covert operations.

SEYMOUR HERSH: It also wasn't reported to many places inside the military. There were other people in other institutions that should have known but were not informed. The operation was very secret.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: There was some critique of your article by people who are engaged in evaluating open-source intelligence (OSINT) on ships and airplanes in the Baltic Sea region, saying that no Norwegian plane was detected directly at the spot of the explosions on September 26 or the days before.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Any serious covert operation takes OSINT into account and works around it. As I said, there were people on the mission who took care of this issue.

FABIAN SCHEIDLER: What role does courage play for you in your profession?

SEYMOUR HERSH: What's courageous about telling the truth? Our job isn't to be afraid. And sometimes it gets ugly. There have been times in my life, when — you know, I don't talk about it. Threats aren't made to people like me; they're made to children of people like me. There's been awful stuff. But you don't worry about it — you can't. You have to just do what you do.

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