



**Kristie Macrakis.** *Seduced by Secrets: Inside the Stasi's Spy-Tech World.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 370 S. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88747-2.



**Reviewed by** Katrin Paehler (Department of History, Illinois State University)

**Published on** H-German (September, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

## No Cloaks, No Daggers: The Stasi and Its Technological Obsessions

As I write this review, Berlin newspapers are providing their readers with a steady stream of news on Klaus Kurras—the West Berlin policeman who, during a demonstration on June 2, 1967, shot the student Benno Ohnesorg and was unmasked a Stasi informant forty-two years later in late May 2009. While the yellow-press outlet *Bild* accuses Kurras of betraying Americans to East Germany, the liberal *Tagesspiegel* provides details on Kurras's reams of reports to East Berlin and their modes of reproduction and transmission—wireless, dead-drops, and Minox cameras. Twenty years after the Berlin Wall came tumbling down and Berlin's reputation as the world's spy capital began to fade, two realizations dawn: reverberations of Berlin's former role are still being felt, and Kristie Macrakis has written a timely book.

*Seduced by Secrets* provides fascinating insights into the role of technology at the East German Ministry of State Security (MfS). The book is divided into two parts, roughly equal in length, with the first focusing on foreign operations. Here Macrakis is mainly interested in the clandestine—and sometimes not so—acquisition of tech-

nology by the MfS's Sector of Science and Technology (SWT) and its main agents. The book's second part focuses on spy gadgets; that is, the development and deployment of intelligence technologies in their broadest sense and their many—external as well as internal—uses. The book's two parts differ quite substantially in flavor: the first part is biographically driven; strange, fascinating, sometimes repugnant characters populate the pages and make for a rather wild ride. The second part provides detailed descriptions of the Stasi's spy technologies, their development and specifications, and their various uses. This material makes for drier reading, but Macrakis's background as a historian of science, her talents as a storyteller, and her apparent fascination with the gadgets and their use allow her to keep the story puttering along nicely. Indeed, this section has all the markings of a handy reference guide to the spy trade: it discusses some methods and, more importantly, spy paraphernalia from the East (and some from the West), all of which Macrakis describes and evaluates clearly and competently.

Before delving into some of the book's details, a word of explanation is in order: Macrakis uses the terms "Stasi" and "MfS" interchangeably. This usage is correct, as beginning in 1956, both internal policing and surveillance and foreign intelligence were part of Erich Mielke's Ministry for State Security. Thus these terms can equally be used to describe both internal surveillance and foreign intelligence efforts. Ordinary German usage applies the term "Stasi" almost exclusively to describe the GDR's system of internal surveillance and repression. In this review, I follow Macrakis' lead, even though my "German ear" finds this usage a bit *gewöhnungsbedürftig*. But then, my difficulties also make me wonder how much I have internalized the remonstrations of the late Markus "Mischa" Wolf that his foreign intelligence section may have been part of Mielke's universe officially, but never, ever really.

The six chapters of the first part deal with the GDR's clandestine acquisition of technology and are heavily tilted towards individual agents, even though one of the chapters provides the history of the SWT. Generally speaking, these chapters show the Stasi's success in recruiting and planting agents—allegedly half of all Stasi agents in the West belonged to SWT—and in stealing western technological secrets. The chapter on the defector Werner Stiller, aka Peter Fischer, entitled "Hero, Traitor, Playboy, Spy," delivers what the title promises, while the chapter on "Kid" and "Paul," two Americans in the employ of the Stasi, provides interesting insights into their different spy careers, mindsets, and motivations.

Not only the problem of motivation, but also the more general profile of agents working for SWT loom large in the chapter in which Macrakis delves into "Rosenholz" (the Stasi's foreign department agent card files, somehow acquired by the CIA after the Berlin Wall fell) and SIRA (System for Information, Research, and Evaluation), located at the Stasi archives. Whereas Rosenholz contains names, SIRA listed and rated all materials delivered by agents and noted the East German companies that received the information. Taken together, these databases provide valuable insight into Stasi operations abroad. Many agents were small fish in large ponds, but then, small fish often have fine access to important material. Even top sources were often "male salaried employees at companies at which electronics played the leading role" (p. 82). Some sources owned their own firms, and many of them had "some sort of connection to East Germany" (p. 83). The Stasi, like all spy agencies, "preyed on human weakness," but people with problems also tended to volunteer (p. 83). Most of the women involved in these oper-

ations played supporting roles, and none of them were recruited through "Romeos"—that is, Stasi men who posed as love interests (p. 84).

With its agents, the Stasi managed to penetrate all of West Germany's most sensitive institutions and SWT had agents planted in the big, relevant companies, such as IBM, Siemens (which was particularly hard hit) AEG/Telefunken, and the defense contractor MBB (Messerschmitt-Bölkow-Blohm). Agents could also be found in research institutes and universities. These diverse agents' motivations varied and sometimes shifted. Initially, ideological reasons were prevalent among such individuals, but soon the need for money became the prime motivating factor for many. Even in 1989, however, these motivations were equally balanced among agents, with ideology taking a slight lead. Not taking the card files at face value, Macrakis points to the relevance of MICE—money, ideology, compromise, and ego—in a person's complex reasoning for becoming a spy. Still, the argument that a spy's activity for the MfS could help to preserve world peace in the scary bipolar world of the Cold War proved quite persuasive for some prospective agents.

Another valuable aspect of the work is Macrakis's discussion of the human web that the GDR maintained for espionage purposes, although here again one sees the system's disadvantages. While the MfS could access a substantial flow of information, it came courtesy of an "incredibly bloated human web of recruiters, instructors, couriers, and residents" (p. 93). This observation, in turn, dovetails nicely with another of Macrakis's insights, one that runs like a red thread through the book's first part: the Stasi's technological espionage eventually ceased to be cost-effective and "the Stasi overestimated the power of stolen technological secrets to solve [the GDR's] economic problems" (p. 93). Indeed, the reliance on stolen secrets—and the concurrent need to purchase embargoed western equipment clandestinely and smuggle it in, a topic at the forefront of the chapter "The Computer Fiasco"—never did solve the GDR's economic quagmire and may even have hampered indigenous research and technical development. In addition, this strategy burned money—including valuable foreign currency—like there was no tomorrow. Caught up in the great game of espionage, the Stasi was, in the words of the title, "seduced by secrets" and lost sight of its original goals. Macrakis also suggests that "even when the goals were achieved... an insular spy culture [emerged,] more intent on securing its power than protecting national security" (p. 3).

The book's second part discusses in much detail the technical tricks of the trade. One chapter discusses the Technical Operations Sector—the research and development division of the MfS, which Macrakis nicknames “Q-Section,” À la James Bond—including its undercover contracts with prestigious East German firms and its help for fellow socialist states, especially those in the Third World (North Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua). In contrast to what western analysts might have assumed, the Technical Operations Sector was led by men who both were party loyalists and technical experts. In their latter function they were often frustrated by economic planning. Nevertheless, the Technical Operations Sector remained a well-organized outfit that developed gadgets for both foreign espionage and internal surveillance needs.

Subsequent chapters delve into this technology in great detail. One deals with secret writing, another with hidden cameras, yet another with eavesdropping. Chapters on “Smell Science” and “Spy Dust” round out the offerings. Generally speaking, these chapters provide the historical (and frequently criminal science) background and the subsequent Stasi-defined development of a certain gadget, put them into an international context, and subsequently discuss their various applications. Counterintelligence and the surveillance of dissidents take on important roles in these chapters, and it becomes apparent that the stronger focus on the latter appeared in the late 1970s.

Especially refreshing is Macrakis's decision to put even approaches that seem strange from our perspective—smell differentiation, for example—into international context, thus making them, if not less spooky, then less specifically part of a particular pathology native to the GDR. Macrakis also carefully evaluates their use against citizens of the GDR. Her “Eye Spy” chapter serves as a fine case in point: she discusses the use of cameras to catch spies and people smugglers and notes that dissidents were never the sole focus of these efforts, even though the Stasi targeted them increasingly in the 1980s. She also stresses that with regard to the fine but important line between observation and surveillance, the Stasi largely employed targeted observation. Yet, “in the

eyes of state security, the numbers of enemies had mushroomed, and therefore surveillance also appeared to be blanket” (p. 251). All the same, Macrakis writes, “‘Big Brother’ only watched you if they suspected a violation of their restrictive laws” (p. 252). Macrakis does not fail to consider the response to MfS activities, which points to the system's insidious effects: people thought they were being watched, and “this was perhaps a more effective tool than actually creating permanent eyes” (p. 226).

Throughout the book, Macrakis's background as a historian of science benefits the reader. She knows how to explain technical issues precisely and clearly. Her own fascination with the hands-on aspects of her research comes through as well. Her descriptions of trying to open concealed compartments preserved in the evidence collection of the Bundeskriminalamt or of having her class prepare secret ink based on Stasi recipes give this book a special flavor but never detract from its seriousness of purpose. The book is not without occasional flaws in the quality of its prose, and readers interested in the gender aspects of espionage will be titillated by the book rather than satisfied. Macrakis also takes a particular stance toward the writing of history in the beginning of the work, writing that history is not an argument, but a “selection of material” with which to make a point (p. xv). Occasionally the work focuses so heavily on the material that the reader would like a more strongly made point. Even so, the author should be lauded for her willingness to move beyond the well-trodden path of Stasi research, especially to consider the material culture and scientific aspects of GDR spying, and the elegance with which she does it.

Macrakis has written a terrific book that will make fascinating reading for general audiences as well as experts. I also expect that it would work very well in a class on espionage. Its potential as a reference is a final tremendous contribution: there may come a day when I will quickly need to refer to the evolution of East German spy cameras. Now I know where to go. As one of my M.A. students might put it, the book “is crack for nerds”; I cannot find better words. *Seduced by Secrets* is highly recommended for anyone interested in espionage.

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**Citation:** Katrin Paehler. Review of Macrakis, Kristie, *Seduced by Secrets: Inside the Stasi's Spy-Tech World*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

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