Seduced by Secrets: Inside the Stasi’s Spy-Tech World

John R. Arpin
Kristie Macrakis
the Voice of America over missions, “firewalls,” journalism norms, and organizational independence.

Yet the book has limitations. He problematically conflates the generic and constituent elements of public diplomacy—listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting—in the book’s framework of underlying themes. He gives (as he recognizes) disproportionate attention to Washington, USIA’s directors, and broadcast media.

The author ends with a brief look at lessons for the future, such as the need to include public diplomacy in foreign-policy planning and for the United States to listen as well as speak. These are valuable insights. But new forces are shaping twenty-first-century diplomacy. Networks challenge hierarchies. Attention—not information—is the scarce resource. Globalism, nonstate actors, a mix of secular and religious “big ideas,” digital technologies, and new media are transforming the old order. Cull is sensitive to these forces and to the ways in which they are changing diplomacy. Perhaps one day he will write another book that completes his history of USIA and explores the evolution of public diplomacy in a world that is vastly different from the Cold War. In the meantime, Cull’s masterful history will be the gold standard in scholarship on USIA.

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Michigan State University professor Kristie Macrakis provides an interesting, if somewhat disjointed, look into one part of the former East German Ministry for State Security, the department commonly known as the “Stasi.” In its time, the Stasi was one of the most effective intelligence and security organizations on the planet. The book under review provides a look into a key aspect of Stasi operations. Its author, Kristie Macrakis, has written several books on modern Germany and conveys a deep understanding of German thought and attitudes, but her lack of knowledge on intelligence matters unfortunately limits her understanding of her chosen topic. However, the professional who is willing to dig past the discrepancies will find value.

The book is divided into two parts, “High-Tech” and “Spy-Tech.” The latter section focuses on “spy technology” and will fascinate the dilettante and inform the professional. It is in this section that Macrakis appears more comfortable and writes with greater confidence and insight. If your favorite James Bond character is Q, you will love this section. Secret writing, spy cameras, and other surveillance gadgets abound.

Unfortunately, the first section is not as well written as the second. It provides valuable information for intelligence and policy professionals, focusing on the Stasi’s quest to steal high-technology information and hardware from the West, primarily West Germany. Macrakis describes economic espionage as a major role for the Stasi’s foreign-intelligence arm, backed by an extensive organization within the ministry and throughout the East German state. However, an inadequate understanding

of intelligence prevents her from presenting real insights, which readers must find for themselves. Still, the depth of the author’s research and her superior understanding of the German psyche are definite enablers for an astute reader.

On the basis of extensive archival research as well as interviews with former officers, the author describes how the Stasi succeeded in stealing technical plans, equipment, and software. Attempting to gain an economic edge on the West, East Germans spent thousands of marks to steal millions of marks’ worth of technology. Macrakis also describes the ultimate futility of this effort: East Germany could not incorporate the technology faster than the West could innovate and thus lagged farther and farther behind. Stealing technology is relatively simple, but incorporating that technology and making it an effective part of a national economy is not.

Another major challenge for the Stasi was Western technology-control regimes. While imperfect and implemented long after the Stasi had begun its operations, these regimes significantly increased the effort required. Eventually, the cost of stealing and the inability of East Germany to integrate what it took doomed the Stasi’s efforts to failure.

Contemporary critics of current technology-control regimes should note that many nations have learned from the Stasi’s mistakes and now make the transfer of “know-how” a key element of their technological-industrial-economic espionage programs. Those charged with enforcing technology-transfer laws can also learn lessons from this work.

In March 1921, the U.S. subchaser SC-154 fired on a cable ship attempting to land a transoceanic cable near Miami, Florida. The cable to South America would have been operated under foreign control. While the ship was undamaged, the cable never reached land. The lessons of World War I had left the United States willing to use force rather than allow a new foreign-controlled communications link to North America. In his excellent study, Jonathan Winkler recalls these episodes, describing the international and naval communications structures of the era, their influence on the war, and America’s recognition of its dependence on foreign communications systems. The Navy, with a cadre of technical experts and the need to command and control a worldwide fleet, played a central role in shaping a U.S. communications policy intended to reduce these vulnerabilities.

The years before World War I represent the start of our networked world. Trade, overseas news, colonial administration and the coordination of far-flung military forces all became dependent on a web of undersea communications cables, supplemented by a limited number of long-range radio stations. Understanding this dependence, both Great Britain and Germany entered the war with contingency plans to cut enemy...