



# Surveillance & Society



## Book Review

Schmeidel, John C. 2008. *STASI: Sword and Shield of the Party*. London: Routledge.

208 pp, \$160 (US) hardcover, ISBN 0-415-36589-9.

## Wesley Wark

Professor, Munk Centre, University of Toronto and Visiting Research Professor, University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.  
<mailto:wkwark@aol.com>

John Schmeidel is one of many distinguished Ph.D. students to have emerged from Professor Christopher Andrew's research seminar at Cambridge University. Given Professor Andrew's expertise on Soviet intelligence, it was only natural that some of his students would turn their attention to that most famous clone of the KGB, the East German spy service known as the STASI (more formally the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*).

John Schmeidel's explorations of the STASI began in the 1990s and focused on the question of STASI support for both West German and Middle Eastern terrorist groups. His new book has an obvious lineage in a Ph.D. thesis, but has benefited greatly from the passage of time, the opening of additional, STASI-related archives, an outpouring of work on the STASI in both German and English, and on a looser structure and more personally inflected writing style than might be encouraged in a buttoned-down thesis. Altogether, what John Schmeidel creates in this relatively short monograph is both an excellent overall introduction to the history and nature of the STASI, but also some insightful case studies of particular areas of STASI investigation. His case studies include STASI penetration of the churches, the universities and the bohemian (or the closest the GDR could come to having such a scene) art world; in addition, there are excellent chapters that look outward to STASI foreign intelligence operations and to its curious role as an aid and abettor of international terrorism.

It is easy to become a little breathless about some of the more astounding statistics regarding the STASI and its role in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). At its height, and on the brink of its own dissolution in 1989, it employed some 90,000 personnel, making it one of the largest spy services in the world, and vastly bigger than any western opponent. One citizen in every 180 of the GDR was on the STASI payroll, a fact alone that earns it the posthumous title of Orwellian. When the spies fled the building with the opening of the Wall and the collapse of the East German state, they left behind a staggering 122 kilometres of files. The challenge of any book on the STASI is to put these astounding numbers in perspective.

John Schmeidel accomplishes this task by emphasizing three important historical characteristics of the STASI. The first, and slightly paradoxical one, is that there was nothing in its early years that marked it for super-spy status. In fact, the early years of the STASI were distinctly rocky, especially after the GDR experienced one of the earliest stirrings of dissent anywhere behind the Iron Curtain in the shape of an industrial construction workers uprising in 1953. It was only in the "long" decade of the 1970s, that ran on a STASI clock from the troublesome year of 1968 down to 1980, that the STASI assumed its familiar shape as a massive and bloated spy bureaucracy aimed primarily at the luckless inhabitants of the GDR. One of the more cheerful statistics offered by Schmeidel is that one-third of all East Germans approached by the STASI to serve as infamous IMs (Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter, or literally "unofficial colleague") turned them down, which must have taken some courage.

Wark, Wesley. 2009. Review of Schmeidel's *STASI*. *Surveillance & Society* 6(1): 92-93.

<http://www.surveillance-and-society.org> | ISSN: 1477-7487

© The author(s), 2009 | Licensed to the Surveillance Studies Network under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

The year 1968 was the spark for what would be the long decade's massive growth in the STASI ranks (it increased by 60% in size over this period), but the hunt for internal dissidents, wreckers and spies would be subsequently fuelled by the signing of the Helsinki accords in 1975 and an understandable desire of the party leadership of the GDR that its citizens not take these paper freedoms too much to heart.

A second theme emphasized by Schmeidel is that the STASI flourished in a vacuum. It had no real competitors for its job, once the Soviets had relinquished direct control. The East German criminal police (from which the STASI was born in the late 1940s) were easily shoved aside, as were nascent attempts by the military to take on an internal surveillance role. There were also few controls, political or judicial, on the STASI. Its only no-go area for operations, curiously, was the ranks of the East German communist party, a distinctly un-Orwellian limitation.

A third theme that emerges in Schmeidel's study turns some conventional wisdom on its head. Schmeidel acknowledges that the STASI was very effective in its foreign intelligence operations, focused quite relentlessly on its West German neighbour. The STASI enjoyed wonderful successes with its penetration agents, both on a high level (such as Gunter Guillaume, who helped bring down the Brandt government) and at a more mundane, but still operationally effective level with its cruel "grey mice" strategy aimed at suborning female clerical workers with just the right kinds of clearances and access. What Schmeidel shows is that these foreign intelligence coups had a significant impact on domestic intelligence operations, where the STASI, perhaps unique among spy services of its day, was able to bring its sophisticated international spy expertise and tactics to bear on the unsuspecting (and often innocent) citizens of the GDR.

The story of the STASI's role as a support mechanism for terrorist groups has been told previously by Schmeidel in a journal article from 1993 published in *Intelligence and National Security*. But this material earns its place in the monograph, as it is an extraordinary story. How the GDR became a state sponsor of terrorism is a meandering tale that begins with an insistence on the part of the Soviet big brother that all the Warsaw Pact states engage in a little collective help for "world revolutionary movements." The geographic slice of the pie assigned to East Germany was quite wide ranging: The Middle East, Africa and Central America. As Schmeidel tells it, what began as a support for "muscular communism" took some surprising turns. After the terrorist attacks on the Munich Olympic village in 1972, the STASI created a special department to penetrate terrorist groups (Department XXII). Soon its mission morphed from counter-intelligence to support for such organisations as the Red Army Faction, the various gangs run by "Carlos the Jackal," and the PLPF (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine). Eventually, the STASI cooled to this mission, not because they were seized by moral scruples about supporting terrorism, but rather least because it was complicating its other intelligence operations.

There are questions that go unanswered in this study. Perhaps the most beguiling is whether the STASI ever saw the end coming. It was, in theory, well placed to do so, with informational tentacles reaching out into all corners of society. But Schmeidel never takes us closer to this intriguing issue than to say that STASI reports between 1985 and 1990 were pessimistic and that the STASI "found that it had presented its intelligence product to a regime whose forty years in power had not brought legitimacy" (108). Perhaps the best evidence that the STASI enjoyed no real telescreens into the lives and attitudes of GDR citizens in the late 1980s was the tumultuous and anarchical nature of its demise—from which generations of historians, and a nimble CIA with lots of money, were able to profit through the acquisition of immense numbers of files.

Making sense of this intelligence archive will preoccupy scholars for a long time to come. Schmeidel offers a good, short, preliminary guide to the meaning of it all.