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## Book Review: God's Spies: The Stasi's Cold War Espionage Campaign inside the Church

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## BOOK REVIEW

Elisabeth Braw, *God's Spies: The Stasi's Cold War Espionage Campaign Inside the Church*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019. \$25.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-0-8028-7525-9.

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In 1988, as a teenager, Elisabeth Braw accompanied her grandfather on a visit to East Germany. He wanted to expand her horizons beyond her Swedish homeland, and she found the small nation she visited intriguing, so different from her own country. The following year she eagerly watched as the Berlin Wall was breached and dismantled.

Following in her grandfather's footsteps, Braw became a journalist. This book shows her continuing fascination with the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The sterling reputation she has earned in her field in intervening years helped open doors for the research she undertook to produce this intriguing, insightful, and troubling book: she was the first person whom the last leader of the church department of the "Stasi" (the "Ministry for State Security" [the GDR's secret police]) allowed an interview -- indeed, he granted her several interviews. (This man had worked his way up in that organization since its beginnings and led it for the last eleven years the GDR existed, so he has intimate familiarity with how this segment of the Stasi conducted its work.)

Braw also had ready access to the Stasi's voluminous files, from 1.7 million informants. Although the waning days of the GDR saw Stasi agents shredding its most recent records, the task was overwhelming, and most of those files have been preserved. The sheer volume of them -- coupled with the tedious quotidian, mundane nature of much of what was "reported" by these informants and dutifully included in those files -- would be daunting for researchers who might want to pursue extensive research into the full panoply of Stasi espionage. Braw focused on "Department XX/4" of the Stasi -- the department that spied on the Christian churches (and especially the Lutheran church) within the GDR. This Stasi department targeted the GDR's own citizens, hoping to identify and deal with threats to the country's continuing existence which might emanate from the Lutheran church, which was perceived as particularly problematic, since it existed as one body straddling the awkward division of Germany into the Federal Republic and

the GDR (and, worse yet for the Stasi's concerns, was a member in the Lutheran World Federation and in the World Council of Churches, offering the Lutheran church ready access to the views and practices of the non-Communist world).

The author also followed up by contacting several people still living who either served as spies for the Stasi or became victims of its endeavors and obtained permission to tell their stories, names included. Journalistic integrity drove her to search for evidence that would contradict the materials she found in the Stasi files; significantly, she found none. What she offers in this book, consequently, is well-based and dutifully corroborated information about the undeniably successful endeavors of the GDR's secret police to spy on the leadership of the Lutheran church in East Germany. What she lays out in the book makes for informative, chilling, even fascinating reading. The book is well written, but it is definitely not edifying reading.

The Stasi tried to recruit pastors, seminary students, seminary professors, and even bishops (as well as their secretaries) as informants. Since Lutheran bishops had warned the pastors serving under their oversight to report any Stasi attempts to recruit them as spies – and, of course, to reject all such advances – the Stasi soon learned to identify themselves, when they initially contacted members of the clergy, as representatives of the GDR's ministry of culture or education. While many clergy followed these episcopal instructions, many others – even some bishops! -- found the attention and the blandishments offered by their governmental contacts attractive, so much so that many pastors, seminary professors, seminary students, and even some bishops and their secretaries became spies on those with whom they worked and prayed. So successful were the Stasi's endeavors in Department XX/4 that clergy and seminary circles soon enough came to assume that one or more of their colleagues were Stasi informants.

The venality of these informants whose stories are recounted by the author is on display. One professor at a lesser seminary kept lobbying his Stasi handler for a more prestigious post, as a professor at a respected university, even though this professor had the reputation of being an utterly boring instructor who seemed disinterested in what he was teaching and, furthermore, had a dismal publishing record. The Stasi recognized that if such a man were to end up in a prestigious position, it would be obvious to all his colleagues that he owed that position to government interference – and that he would thus be “outed” as a Stasi informant. Even so, to keep him reporting on his colleagues and students, the Stasi had to placate his vanity in other ways. Another Stasi informant joined the ranks as a student in a seminary and dutifully (and

effectively) reported on the comments and plans of his fellow students to escape the GDR. While they were arrested and sentenced to prison terms, he managed to escape suspicion. Indeed, he continued with his studies, eventually earning his seminary degree and being sent to do graduate studies in the theology department at the University of Lund. He continued his reporting throughout his graduate studies and subsequent service at Lund as an instructor in the theology department – where he helped prepare Elisabeth Braw’s father for the defense of his Ph.D. dissertation. Eventually, his faithful service to the Stasi managed to get him a visiting professorship at a leading East German university in the late 1980s; with the collapse of the GDR, though, his long service to the Stasi was exposed and his career came to an end.

He was one of the few of “God’s spies” who were publicly shamed, however. While it became known to the leadership of the Lutheran church that many other clergy and professors (and even a few bishops) had served as informants, only a few were defrocked and publicly humiliated for this treachery. There were simply too many to pursue them all, and – so the argument went – where would the Lutheran church look for leaders post-1989 if all of “God’s spies” were disciplined and defrocked? The problems were dealt with “diplomatically,” and many of these erstwhile spies of God retained their clergy responsibilities.

In this volume, Elisabeth Braw offers much to consider, from many angles, to a reader interested in learning about the espionage campaign waged by the Stasi against and within the Lutheran church. Well-written, the book almost reads like a fictional spy story—but it is not fiction. On display are occasional glimpses of human courage and fidelity, but far more frequent are evidences of betrayal, vanity, and careerism among people of the cloth. Yet, as the author points out, even with the deep and pervasive knowledge on the part of the Stasi about what was going on in the Lutheran church, their efforts to stifle protest and protect the GDR from collapse were thwarted by that church: the “prayer for peace” meetings held in so many Lutheran churches during the last months of the GDR’s existence served as protest and catalyst for opposition to the GDR. The Stasi’s efforts in Department XX/4, extensive as they were, failed.