
Out of Sight: Industrial Espionage, Ocular Authority and East German Communism, 1965–1989

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Abstract

The Stasi continues to enjoy a reputation as one of the most effective espionage agencies in the world, especially in the area of foreign intelligence gathering. This article employs the case of Gerhardt Ronneberger, one of East Germany's most capable spies, to challenge assumptions about the Stasi's operational successes, economic relevance and methodological proficiency. In particular, it argues that East German intelligence gathering was undermined by an institutionalised distinction between sight, or the work of observation, and vision, or the process of signification. In Ronneberger's case, the spy agency wasted considerable time and resources trying to make sense of his operational performance and political reliability. In the end, however, even his most spectacular successes, which included smuggling a laser-guided navigation system into the GDR and acquiring proscribed computer chip and microprocessor designs from Toshiba, did not matter, since they did not change East Germany's inability to narrow the technological gap with the West.

The suspicious person . . . regards a communication or a situation not to apprehend what it is, but to understand what it signifies.¹

Gerhardt Ronneberger had planned to stash the contraband in the boot of the Lada 1600 he had been assigned, but when he opened it to retrieve his luggage, the key broke off in the lock.² Fortunately, Ronneberger could draw upon the vast

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¹ David Shapiro, *Neurotic Styles* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), 65.

² The following account is based on BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, Tonbandschrift, 'Bericht über ein Zusammentreffen mit Herrn [M] am 20. und 21.3.1985 in Gera und Hermsdorf', 2 April 1985, 25–32.

resources of the East German spy apparatus to fix the problem. That very afternoon, agents of the Ministry for State Security (MfS or Stasi) repaired the lock of the boot and provided him with a new key – a service for which ordinary East Germans would have waited months because of the chronic shortages of goods and services.³

The next day – 21 March 1985 – Ronneberger met his West German contact, an influential Free Democrat and businessman, in Gera, an East German industrial town not far from the border with Bavaria. The contact handed over 3,000 semiconductors and a computer monitor that he had smuggled into the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in return for 60,000 West German marks. This was not the first time that Herr M. had illegally sold hi-tech goods to the GDR.⁴ Although Western businessmen were forbidden to export so-called ‘dual use technology’, or consumer goods that could be used for military purposes, to communist states, M. had discovered during the 1970s that selling electronic components to the East Germans not only made for good business, but also good politics. As an ardent supporter of détente, M. justified sharing Western technology with the GDR as a method of overcoming German–German division.⁵ Nor was it the first time that M. had used his clandestine meetings with his East German partners to spend time with his mistress, as Ronneberger dutifully reported. For many West German businessmen, the GDR was not only the source of excellent profits, but also a discreet playground where they could cheat openly on their wives.⁶

By the next morning, however, M.’s girlfriend had disappeared, and Ronneberger and his business partner were able to discuss future deals in private over breakfast. Later that day Ronneberger escorted M. on a carefully orchestrated tour of the VEB Kombinat Keramische Werke Hermsdorff, where M. had the opportunity to view some of the equipment he had sold to the GDR and hear about the plant’s future needs. After a discussion of renewed US pressure on its Western allies to tighten

³ For more on the problem of shortages in the East German planned economy, see Ina Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis. Die Geschichte der Konsumkultur in der DDR* (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau, 1999). For the specific problem of automobiles, see Jonathan R. Zatin, ‘The Vehicle of Desire: The Trabant, the Wartburg, and the End of the GDR’, *German History*, 15, 3 (1997), 358–80; and Jonathan R. Zatin, *The Currency of Socialism. Money and Political Culture in East Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ch. 5.

⁴ To protect their identity, the names of Western businessmen have been rendered anonymous in conformity with the latest emendations to the laws permitting access to Stasi documents.

⁵ As Kristie Macrakis has argued, the Stasi ‘served as a conduit of knowledge from the West to the East’ (Kristie Macrakis, ‘Espionage and Technology Transfer in the Quest for Scientific–Technical Prowess’, in Kristie Macrakis and Dieter Hoffmann, *Science under Socialism. East Germany in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 83).

⁶ Perhaps the most amusing example came later that year, when a woman called out to Ronneberger’s Western contact, ‘Hansie, don’t you recognise me anymore?’ [‘Hänschen, kennst Du mich denn gar nicht mehr?’] (BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, Tonbandabschrift, ‘Berichte über Verhandlungen mit der Firma [X] in der Zeit nach der Leipziger Herbstmesse bis Mitte November 1985’, 168). For other examples of Ronneberger’s meetings with West German businessmen and their mistresses, see BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, Tonbandabschrift, ‘Bericht über das Zusammentreffen mit [X] am 14. Juni 1985’, 3 July 1985, 86; and BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, ‘Bericht über die Verhandlungen mit Herrn [X] am 30.11.1985 im Palasthotel’, no date, 183.

security measures and prevent communist states from acquiring computer technology, the two men parted. M. drove back to the Federal Republic and Ronneberger set out towards East Berlin. A short time later, however, the Lada's starter and accelerator failed, stranding Ronneberger outside the East German capital just as night began to fall in the dead of winter with contraband computer components worth DM 60,000 stashed in his boot.

Although emergency telephones supposedly lined major East German highways, Ronneberger would later claim that he was unable to locate one. He tried to flag down passing drivers for help, but gave up after more than an hour. Despite the insistence of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) that public ownership of the means of production had produced an enviable social solidarity in the GDR, only two people bothered to stop and ask if he needed a lift.⁷ He did need help, but he could not accept what they offered, even though it was cold and getting dark. As he commented acerbically in his official report on the incident, 'I could not simply leave the vehicle because I was transporting 60,000 marks-worth of computer components in the car.'⁸ He could not hitch a ride, and neither could he hitch the Lada to the East German Trabant or Polish van that stopped to offer help because their engines were not powerful enough to tow it to East Berlin.

Just as it seemed that the lack of socialist camaraderie and the poor quality of communist cars were conspiring to thwart Ronneberger's attempt to make off with Western computer technology, a BMW with diplomatic plates pulled up about 100 metres in front of him. In broken German, the driver offered to use his West German luxury sedan to tow Ronneberger back to East Berlin. Despite his fear that the BMW driver was a capitalist agent and that he was about to fall into a Western trap, Ronneberger decided that he 'had no other alternative', as he would later assure his superiors.⁹ In fact, however, the driver towed Ronneberger to a parking lot at the Schönefelder Kreuz without incident. Back in the safety of East Berlin, Ronneberger found a telephone and called his wife, who came to pick him up. Together they towed the Lada to a Stasi repair shop, where he unloaded the smuggled computer components in safety.

A few days later, Ronneberger met his case officer for the mandatory debriefing for agents who had contact with the West. According to the reconstruction of events he offered his superiors, Ronneberger had managed to escape from a variety of home-made mishaps – from an unreliable Soviet car and an inadequate communications infrastructure to a lack of socialist solidarity and horsepower – and successfully acquire valuable Western technology. By his own admission, however, he had accepted assistance from a potential Western agent, which had possibly blown his cover. Worse

⁷ According to one East German handbook, 'the interests and aims of the classes and groups in socialism...rest on socialist production relations, comradesly cooperation, and mutual assistance' (Waltraud Böhme et al., eds., *Kleines Politisches Wörterbuch* (East Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1988), 765).

⁸ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, Tonbandschrift, 'Bericht über ein Zusammentreffen mit Herrn [M] am 20. and 21.3.1985 in Gera und Hermsdorf', 2 April 1985, 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

still, he had dropped out of sight for several hours, returning late from meeting a West German with the excuse that his car had broken down on a well-travelled stretch of highway. Such an unlikely explanation only invited closer scrutiny, and the missing hours for which Ronneberger could not credibly account were certain to resurrect old questions about his political reliability. Although he had served the GDR with distinction, both in his official capacity as one of the most effective salesmen of East German electronic equipment and in his secret guise as one of the most skilled purchasers of proscribed technologies, Ronneberger was acutely aware of the lingering suspicions that he was a double agent.¹⁰

This is a story of incompetence, infidelity, and the difference between appearance and reality. Although 'a special aura surrounds the foreign espionage service of the GDR', the MfS was hardly the efficient and effective spy agency of political legend.¹¹ Its efforts to acquire the technological and scientific secrets of the West – one of the areas in which it is alleged to have excelled – were often betrayed by decaying infrastructure and systemic ineptitude. Technical failures, together with the clumsiness and indiscretion of its agents, wrecked operations with surprising frequency. Even when they successfully completed missions, moreover, Stasi agents were often subjected by their own people to intense scrutiny in futile attempts to discover their true allegiances. Worse still, the efforts of economic spies such as Ronneberger were largely wasted because East German industry was unable to make use of the technology they managed to smuggle into the GDR. As one historian has concluded, MfS agents and officers were aware that narrowing the scientific and technological gap with the West was an 'illusionary goal'.¹²

As the recent blunders of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) – from its failure to detect the terrorist plot to attack the United States on 11 September 2001 to its inability to convince the Bush administration that Iraq possessed no weapons of mass destruction – remind us, no intelligence service is immune to operational

¹⁰ After working as an electrical engineer from 1949 to 1952 for one of the GDR's largest power generators, VEB Energiebezirk Süd, Ronneberger switched to export sales at DIA ET Berlin. From 1959 to 1961, he served with the GDR's economic delegation to Egypt, returning to Berlin as deputy director of VVB Heimelectric Import-Export, the kernel of what would become the GDR's most important electronics firm. In 1966, Ronneberger was transferred to VVB Bauelemente und Vakuumtechnik, then sent to Jena and made chief of foreign trade at the famous Carl Zeiss works in 1973. In 1978, he was brought back to Berlin and promoted to general director of AHB Elektronik, the GDR's main producer of computer technology, where he worked until placed on administrative leave in the late 1980s (BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, HA XVIII/8, Leutnant Ondrusch, 'Vorschlag zur Bestätigung als Reisekader', 30 Jan. 1976, 179; Gerhardt Ronneberger, *Deckname "Saale". High-Tech-Schmuggler unter Schalck-Goldkowsky* (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 1999), 11–15).

¹¹ Jens Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern. Die Geschichte der Stasi 1945–1990* (Stuttgart and Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001), 196. For exemplary depictions of the Stasi as infallible, see Hubertus Knabe, *Die unterwanderte Republik. Stasi im Westen* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1999), and the recent film *Das Leben der Anderen*.

¹² Macrakis, 'Espionage and Technology Transfer', 121. In contrast, Markus Wolf, the legendary chief of the Stasi's foreign espionage operations, has claimed that 'the efforts of the GDR's economy to master technical progress were given a powerful stimulus through our work' (cited in David Childs and Richard Popplewell, *The Stasi. The East German Intelligence and Security Service* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1996), 129).

failure or political irrelevance.¹³ Because Ronneberger's story is also a tale of the difference between seeing and believing, I argue that the Stasi's blind spots derived from an overweening faith in ocular authority. That is, the East German intelligence service worked on the assumption that it could illuminate through reason what is concealed by ignorance. True to its authoritarian proclivities, however, the Stasi reduced the Enlightenment model of improving clarity of perception through analysis to an invasive transparency that was as intolerant of alternative perspectives as it was radically sceptical of observable phenomena.

To illustrate how this epistemological framework encouraged a systematic misidentification of cause with effect, and a concomitant waste of resources, I focus on the career of Gerhardt Ronneberger, one of the GDR's most successful yet little-known spies, with an eye to demonstrating that the Stasi's approach to intelligence gathering was organised by an irreconcilable contradiction between 'sight' and 'vision'. Trained as an electrical engineer, Ronneberger's talents as a salesman of electronic goods soon attracted the attention of the MfS, which recruited him as an industrial spy in 1965. By the late 1970s, Ronneberger had become essential to the GDR's efforts to obtain secret technologies from the West, orchestrating some of the Stasi's most spectacular cons – and some of its most conspicuous failures. All along, his handlers spent enormous amounts of time and resources trying to make sense of Ronneberger's operational performance and political reliability. In the hide-and-seek of espionage, the MfS was often confronted with similar puzzles – a situation so complex that it is not possible to tell truth from fiction, or what intelligence analysts call a 'wilderness of mirrors'. Rather than admit to the fundamental indeterminacy of the interpretive process, however, Stasi leaders insisted on establishing clarity where there was none. That is, they allowed their own vision to trump the work of sight, forcing likelihood to masquerade as certainty, speculation to pass for knowledge and belief to impersonate analysis. In Ronneberger's case, this meant loudly protesting his loyalty despite evidence to the contrary, while simultaneously leaving nothing undone in an effort to discover the content of his mind.

As with other spy agencies, a dialectical relationship between sight and vision was institutionalised in the division of labour between 'birdwatchers', as agents in the field are sometimes called, and senior Stasi officers. To uncover the West's economic secrets while concealing information sensitive to the GDR, Ronneberger and his superiors required a method of differentiating worthwhile from worthless information. To this

¹³ In this sense, this article reappraises the effectiveness of East German foreign intelligence gathering in a way similar to the literature on the CIA's incompetence and analogous to the ongoing re-evaluations of the Gestapo. See, for example, Robert Baer, *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War on Terrorism* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002); Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Gerhard Paul and Klaus-Michael Mallmann, eds., *Die Gestapo – Mythos und Realität* (Darmstadt: Primus-Verlag, 2003); and Frederick L. Wethering, 'Counterintelligence: The Broken Triad', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 13, 3 (2000), 265–300. For a brilliant defence of intelligence failures as less common than assumed by outsiders, see Richard K. Betts, 'Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable', *World Politics* 31, 1 (1978), 61–89; and Richard K. Betts, 'Fixing Intelligence', *Foreign Affairs* 81, 1 (2002), 43–59.

end, field agents like Ronneberger adopted a positivistic methodology, regarding themselves as neutral observers of other actors, whom they often referred to as ‘objects’.¹⁴ Even when they went beyond mere taxonomy, East German spies viewed their work as a process of confirmatory surveillance in which that which was true was also accurate. Field agents did not distinguish between truth as a function of resemblance and truth as an instance of revelation; they apprehended data, but left the work of signification to their superiors.¹⁵

To give but one example of the emphasis on objectivity in the field, in July 1985 Ronneberger and a colleague entered into negotiations with a South Korean microchip manufacturer to supply the GDR with some 50,000 64-kb integrated circuits. The deal served to reduce production costs, since the South Koreans wanted to charge between 2.70 and 3.20 East German marks per chip, whereas VEB Kombinat Mikroelektronik charged between 5.50 and 6.50 marks. It also promised to ensure the fulfilment of the plan for microchips. To make it appear as if the chips had been made in the GDR, moreover, the South Koreans even agreed to print an East German manufacturer’s name on them. During the negotiations, however, Ronneberger’s colleague blurted out the main reason for buying the chips was not to reduce costs or to fulfil the plan, but rather to ‘save face before the Politburo’ and show results in the microelectronic sector. Ronneberger reported the incident, not because his colleague had accurately described how politics governed production in the GDR, or even because he had revealed information that the South Koreans could use to raise their prices. Ronneberger denounced his colleague simply because he had transgressed against regulations and divulged to the class enemy information – no matter its content or consequence – about the GDR.¹⁶

If the field agent’s careful division of subject from object facilitated the collection of raw data, however, it was also accompanied by a loss of causality. Only by suppressing the constitutive links between observing subject and observed object could Ronneberger produce knowledge – that is, create an inventory of observable phenomena – and deliver it to his superiors. Where Ronneberger’s gaze was necessarily myopic, however, his superiors could see the forest for the trees. Precisely

¹⁴ Christian Bergmann, *Die Sprache der Stasi. Ein Beitrag zur Sprachkritik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), esp. ch. 2. In MfS slang, case officers referred to their agent as ‘my blue’ – a reference to the agent’s file, which was originally contained in a blue folder. For more on the division between collection and analysis in the US context, see Jeffrey T. Richelson, *The U.S. Intelligence Community* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

¹⁵ The distinction between truth as a resemblance function and truth as revelation was made most famously by Martin Heidegger (Martin Heidegger, ‘The Age of the World Picture’, ‘Science and Reflection’ and ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, in Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977)). See also Jacques Lacan, ‘Le séminaire sur “La lettre volée”’, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in ‘French Freud’, *Yale French Studies*, 48 (1972), 49; Jacques Derrida, ‘The Double Session’, in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 177; and Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993), 269–71.

¹⁶ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, ‘Bericht über die Verhandlung mit Herrn [X] von der Fa. [X] Industrievertretung’, 16 July 1985, 104–6.

because they employed an army of agents, senior Stasi officers had access to more information and a greater variety of sources, which enabled them to expand the temporal and spatial horizon of a given narrative, and so weigh causes and outcomes. Moreover, in contrast to Ronneberger, whose job was to record rather than resolve discrepancies between appearance and reality, his superiors distinguished fact from fiction based on corroboration with other sources and their own experience.

In fact, Ronneberger's superiors were disinclined to believe what he saw because their distance from the field led them to a position of radical scepticism vis-à-vis the observable world. As the following example demonstrates, Stasi officers filtered data through the Leninist distinction between friend and foe and their vision of the MfS's role as 'the sword and shield of the party', which was the organisation's motto. After a key supplier of computer components was arrested by the West German authorities for illegally exporting dual-use technology to the GDR, Ronneberger found a Western businessman he thought would serve as a suitable replacement. Ronneberger's case officer, however, decided that the new contact must be a West German agent because everything was going too smoothly. 'The delivery of the most complicated embargoed goods on short notice and without problem', Lieutenant-Colonel Artur Wenzel wrote, 'reinforces the suspicion of direction by foreign intelligence services.'¹⁷ For twelve months Wenzel and others set a variety of traps aimed at discovering whether the West German businessman was indeed a spy. Although they turned up no hint whatsoever of an espionage connection, the very fact that this businessman 'developed no activities... that indicate any intelligence assignments' only made him more suspect.¹⁸ Paradoxically, the complete lack of evidence of espionage was proof enough of espionage, which is why Wenzel disallowed Ronneberger from dealing with the man.¹⁹ The MfS leadership's insight into the struggle against the West furnished agents like Ronneberger with a worldview as well as specific operational targets. While information flowed upwards, trust and perspective trickled downwards.

It would therefore be misleading to depict spies in the field and their masters in East Berlin as functioning in epistemological complementarity to each other, as if the two perspectives taken together resolved problems of uncertainty. It is true that sight made vision possible, since Stasi leaders were dependent on agents like Ronneberger to act as their eyes and ears in order to create the big picture from the flow of individual images. But the hierarchical structure of political power in the MfS worked to ensure that the process of signification was constantly privileged over

¹⁷ BStU, MfS HA XVIII, 13279, Nöckel and Wenzel, 'Bericht über die Realisierung operativer Maßnahmen im OV "Kaiser"', 12 July 1988, 5.

¹⁸ BStU, MfS HA XVIII, 13279, GMS Rolf, 'Zwischeninformation', 28 June 1988, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1–3; and BStU, MfS HA XVIII, 13279, Kleine to Mittag, 16 Aug. 1988, 7. This line of reasoning is reminiscent of the logic marshalled by the American general, John L. DeWitt, the military commander in charge of defending the West coast until 1943, who argued that sabotage by Japanese-Americans was imminent precisely because there was no evidence of it whatsoever: 'The very fact that no sabotage has taken place to date is a disturbing and confirming indication that such action will be taken' (cited in John Tateishi, *And Justice for All: An Oral History of the Japanese American Detention Camps* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), xv).

Ronneberger's work of surveillance. For this reason, the chasm between field agents and Stasi leadership did not merely reflect a cognitive difference between sight and insight, but also an institutionalised separation between knowledge and meaning. It was not up to Ronneberger to decide what to uncover, only how to uncover it.

This point is all the more crucial because the victory of vision over sight came at the expense of oversight. There was, for example, virtually no political supervision of the MfS – not even the astigmatic oversight of parliamentary control that sometimes constrains Western intelligence services. This absence of clear checks on the power of the MfS helps to account for the institutional union between domestic and foreign intelligence services in Soviet-style regimes.²⁰ More importantly, the lack of accountability also translated into a regard for methods and procedures honoured more in the breach than in the observance. Like most spymasters, the minister for state security, Erich Mielke, could not always trust his eyes and ears. Yet his unchecked authority enabled him to overcome suspicions by fiat. When, for example, the Stasi's economic desk produced a report in 1981 documenting the various ways in which the Politburo's economic policies were ruining East German industry, Mielke not only had the report destroyed, but also forced its authors to apologise for their frank portrayal of the GDR's problems.²¹ When doubt conspired to threaten the hierarchical order embodied by the MfS, visionary Truth always trumped empirical truth. In the case of the GDR's nascent computer industry, for example, 'the elitist belief in the victory of communism concealed the actual situation' from the Stasi leadership.²²

The way in which Ronneberger was recruited exemplifies the institutionalised segregation of sight from insight and its attendant consequences. Because of his obvious talents as a salesman – one otherwise critical officer would later acknowledge his 'elegant negotiating tactics' – Ronneberger attracted attention even before he joined the MfS.²³ True to its belief in an invasive transparency, the Stasi's interest in Ronneberger as a potential asset extended well beyond his work habits. When he was still a young man, for example, he arrived late at work one day. MfS officers investigated, only to discover that the reason for his unusual tardiness was that he had been in bed with a woman. Worried that the affair might pose an obstacle to

²⁰ Of course, the GDR followed the USSR in its institutional organisation. For the American case, see Mark M. Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2005). Under the pressure of the 9/11 attack, some intelligence analysts are demanding the dismantling of these walls. See, for example, John M. Deutch and Jeffrey H. Smith, 'Smarter Intelligence', *Foreign Policy* (January–February 2002), 64–9.

²¹ Maria Haendcke-Hoppe-Arndt, *Die Hauptabteilung XVIII: Volkswirtschaft. Siegfried Suckut, Clemens Vollnhals, Walter Süß, and Roger Engelmann, eds. Anatomie der Staatssicherheit. Geschichte, Struktur und Methoden. MfS-Handbuch, Teil III/10* (Berlin: Der Bundesbeauftragte des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Abt. Bildung und Forschung, 1997), 75–6; and Zatlín, *Currency of Socialism*, ch. 4.

²² Reinhard Buthmann, *Kadersicherung im Kombinat VEB Carl Zeiss Jena. Die Staatssicherheit und das Scheitern des Mikroelektronikprogramms* (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 1997), 129. Ronneberger confirms this in his memoirs (Ronneberger, *Deckname 'Saale'*, 380–2).

²³ See the numerous reports in BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 1.

his career, the Stasi had her transferred.²⁴ This would not be the last time that Stasi officers intervened in his personal life to protect his potential value to the agency. Eventually, Ronneberger's sharp intellect and professional demeanour landed him a posting with the East German embassy in Cairo, where, as an economic attaché from 1959 to 1961, he learned to speak excellent English. According to the head of the East German trade delegation, moreover, it was because of Ronneberger's efforts that the GDR's exports to Egypt 'increased dramatically'.²⁵

It is unclear whether Ronneberger rejected its initial approaches, but his eventual decision to join the Stasi was not exactly voluntary. After he returned from his Egyptian assignment, Ronneberger continued working in the export sector, now as the deputy director of an electrical appliance manufacturer. On 21 December 1965, he left for a meeting after lunch late and having had too much to drink. Stuck in traffic, he tried to overtake a truck in his Wartburg by driving on to the tram tracks at the corner of Siegfriedstrasse and Fanningstrasse, where he slammed into a pedestrian named Anna Bohm. A few hours later Bohm died from her injuries. The East German state prosecutor charged Ronneberger with reckless homicide, arguing that Ronneberger had enough time to avoid hitting Bohm, but that alcohol must have slowed his reactions.²⁶ Shortly thereafter, Ronneberger agreed to serve with the Stasi as an undercover agent, and the charges were dismissed.²⁷

It is worth pointing out that Ronneberger's spectacular career as a spy hinged on a collusive suppression of reality. Although his recklessness and haste provided the pretext for his recruitment into the secret police, his short-sightedness made Ronneberger the perfect field agent. In a profession that valued acuity over judgement, it is nonetheless ironic that Ronneberger's willingness to deny what he had seen was a necessary first step in his career as a watchman. For its part, the Stasi specialised in covering things up and did a splendid job of making Ronneberger's crime disappear. It is only by virtue of a third source accidentally included in Ronneberger's file that we know of the event at all. In his memoirs, which are painstaking in detail but self-serving in interpretation, Ronneberger omits any mention of killing an innocent bystander. Nor do the later assessments of his political reliability written by his superiors make mention of it. This compact against history and memory (and Anna Bohm) secured Ronneberger's dependence on the MfS. But dependence is not the same as loyalty, nor is telling the truth the same as remaining true. Despite the outward signs of Ronneberger's fidelity, his superiors could never be certain where his real allegiances lay.

²⁴ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 1, 72; and BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 1, HA III/3/J, Betr. Bach, 12 March 1958, 79. Ronneberger denies that he had a relationship with this woman (Ronneberger, *Deckname 'Saale'*, 22).

²⁵ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, HA XVIII/8, Leutnant Ondrusch, 'Vorschlag zur Bestätigung als Reisekader', 30 Jan. 1976, 183; Ronneberger, *Deckname 'Saale'*, 11.

²⁶ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 1, Staatsanwalt des Stadtbezirks Berlin-Lichtenberg, Anklageschrift, 29 April 1966, 102–5.

²⁷ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, 17. Ronneberger antedates his membership in the Stasi position to autumn 1965 (Ronneberger, *Deckname 'Saale'*, 12).

Ronneberger's 1982 arrest by West German agents and his subsequent incarceration in a Bavarian jail illustrates how MfS leaders forced meaning to compensate for knowledge. On 5 March 1982, Ronneberger was intercepted by West German authorities as he crossed by train into Bavaria with a suspiciously large sum of money on his person. He was taken by car to Munich, where he was charged with having illegally smuggled sensitive merchandise into the GDR and held on suspicion of 'having worked as a spy against the Federal Republic of Germany [FRG] in the service of a foreign power'.²⁸ As a member of the Co-ordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (COCOM), the FRG had agreed with its capitalist allies to prevent the sale of technology and equipment that might be used for military purposes by communist states.²⁹ For its part, the GDR had sought since its creation in 1949 to circumvent restrictions on East–West trade by importing key technologies via third countries, smuggling goods past West German border guards, or stealing them outright. By the late 1970s, however, the age of East German fixed capital, the inability of economic planning to replenish the East German industrial base, and the growing technological lag with the West convinced the SED leadership that investing in microelectronics would boost sagging productivity rates. Because of the GDR's crushing debt to the West and the political obstacles to acquiring computer technology, however, the party concluded that industrial espionage – or technology transfer via covert means – represented the most effective path to economic modernisation.³⁰ The MfS was charged with laying the foundations of an East German computer industry. Given his engineering expertise, export experience and skills as a salesman, Gerhardt Ronneberger soon became a central figure in the Stasi's clandestine efforts to import Western hi-tech.

West German suspicions that Ronneberger was a Stasi agent were well founded, but there was little evidence to substantiate the accusations. The Bavarian state prosecutor claimed that Ronneberger's enterprise was controlled by the Stasi, noted that Ronneberger's use of West Berlin mailboxes to deal with correspondence was a typical Stasi tactic, and pointed out that Ronneberger consorted with known Stasi

²⁸ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, Dr. Uschold, Ermittlungsrichter des Bayrischen Obersten Landesgerichts, 'Haftbefehl', 5 March 1982, 2. See also BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, 'Strafbefehl', no date, 9–23.

²⁹ COCOM was founded under US leadership on 22 November 1949 in Paris as a multilateral mechanism designed to cut communist states off from strategic technological developments in the West. Although West German restrictions against the sale of sensitive goods to the Soviet bloc had their origin in the US military occupation and thus antedated COCOM, West German enforcement was never as thorough as the United States might have wished. Once the Federal Republic embarked on its own policy of détente, the disagreements with Americans over the role trade should play during the Cold War only grew, fuelled in part by concerns about relations with the GDR and in part by concerns over US attempts to use COCOM to institutionalise its dominant technological position. See Buthmann, *Kadersicherung*, 20; and H el ene Seppain, 'The Divided West: Contrasting German and US Attitudes to Soviet Trade', *Political History* 61, 1 (1990), 51–65.

³⁰ Raymond Bentley, *Research and Technology in the Former German Democratic Republic* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 136; Buthmann, *Kadersicherung*, 17–25; and Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism*, chs. 2, 3, and 4. In a sense, the party's 1983 decision to invest heavily in micro-electronics amounted to a 'gamble for resurrection' – a financial term for making excessively risky investments in the hopes of outsized returns that would restore the country to a positive financial balance.

agents.³¹ First the Bavarian High Court (Bayerisches Oberstes Landesgericht) and then the Federal High Court (Bundesgerichtshof) threw out the prosecutor's charge that Ronneberger was a spy for lack of evidence. As the Federal High Court remarked, the fact that Ronneberger might have imported illegal merchandise into the GDR did not prove that he was a spy.³² Nor were the courts convinced that Ronneberger was involved in circumventing restrictions on exporting sensitive technology. The state prosecutor's key piece of evidence consisted of a letter written by one of Ronneberger's colleagues detailing the purchase of embargoed goods, which hardly constituted clear proof that Ronneberger himself was involved in the deal.

Despite the lack of evidence, however, the Federal High Court was willing to extend Ronneberger's incarceration while the investigation continued. The court justified its decision with reference to the gravity of the sentence Ronneberger would receive if it were indeed proved that his actions were criminal, arguing that 'the continuance of his nearly two months in jail is not disproportionate to the anticipated punishment if he is found guilty'.³³ In response to the federal court's ruling, the Bavarian state prosecutor not only dropped the charge of espionage but also changed the accusation that Ronneberger had suborned criminal activity to aiding and abetting it. Reducing the charges had the effect of lowering the bar for the state's burden of proof, enabling the Bavarian authorities to keep Ronneberger imprisoned until October 1982 on the grounds that he was a flight risk.³⁴

In the FRG the very same conflict between sight and vision was mediated by institutional accountability. Despite their dubious rationale for extending Ronneberger's incarceration, the West German judges, prosecutors and various police agencies were eventually forced by the rule of law to separate what they believed from what they could prove. Without enough evidence to show that Ronneberger was indeed a spy, their insistence on his secret identity remained pure speculation. Put another way, the West German authorities did not trust to appearances, but held fast to the reality that they believed lay beneath the surface Ronneberger presented. Based on East German documents made accessible after 1989, we now know they were right not to be deceived.³⁵ But this *post facto* knowledge does not resolve the

³¹ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, 'Operative Einschätzung', 25 Oct. 1982, 156; BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, Dr. Uschold, Ermittlungsrichter des Bayrischen Obersten Landesgerichts, 'Haftbefehl', 5 March 1982, 2.

³² BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, Bundesgerichtshof, 'Beschluß', no date, 28–9. The Bavarian high court had come to similar conclusions a few weeks earlier (BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, Bayerisches Oberstes Landesgerichts, 'Beschluß', 30 March 1982, 30–5). In fact, Ronneberger himself had overseen the illegal import of merchandise worth over DM 3 million since 1980 from Scholz's company (BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, 'Kontakte des AHB Elekt zur Fa. Alltransistor', 13 March 1982, 88–91).

³³ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, Bundesgerichtshof, 'Beschluß', no date, 29.

³⁴ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, Abt. für Allgemeine Straf- und Bußgeldsachen, Ermittlungsrichter Amtsgericht München, 'Ermittlungsverfahren gegen Ronneberger Gerhardt', 10 Aug. 1982, 7–8.

³⁵ Technically, Ronneberger was an 'unofficial informant' (*inoffizieller Mitarbeiter*), although the title was a mere formality in his case, designed to protect him if caught in precisely these circumstances (BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, 'Abschrift einer Aktennotiz', 27 April 1982, 92–3).



Figure 1. *Photographic record of Ronneberger's Western reel-to-reel tape recorder, made during a clandestine search of his home in August 1977 (courtesy of BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, p. 90)*

epistemological problem of differentiating between appearance and reality. Nor did the acuity of their vision – much less their anti-communism – justify holding a foreign national on speculative charges without significant proof for over six months.



Figure 2. *Photographic record of Ronneberger's West German short-wave radio, made during a clandestine search of his home in August 1977 (courtesy of BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, p. 91)*

The Stasi was confronted with a different version of the same epistemological problem. If West German authorities suspected but could not prove that Ronneberger was a spy, neither could Stasi leaders demonstrate beyond a doubt that he had not become a double agent. By Ronneberger's own account the West Germans tried their best to convince him to defect.³⁶ At first they sought to obtain a confession from him that he was a foreign agent. When that failed, the prosecutor offered him a deal. Arguing that Ronneberger had violated East German currency laws because of the large amount of cash he had been carrying, the prosecutor assured Ronneberger that the SED would punish him when he returned to the GDR. Claiming that he wanted to help Ronneberger, the prosecutor offered to keep two different transcripts of the interrogations to protect him against reprisals by the East German authorities. Interestingly enough, Ronneberger agreed to this arrangement. In return for keeping a portion of the conversation secret, he provided the West Germans with information he had been withholding. Ronneberger would later claim that much of this information was without significance, while the rest was designed to suggest that he was not a Stasi agent.³⁷ Ronneberger would also insist

³⁶ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, 'Abschrift einer Information des IMS 'Saale' vom 3.6.1982', 4 June 1982, 116–19; BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, and HA XVIII/8, 'Operative Einschätzung', 25 Oct. 1982, 156; and Ronneberger, *Deckname 'Saale'*, 57–66.

³⁷ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, 'Abschrift einer Information des IMS 'Saale' vom 3.6.1982', 4 June 1982, 117.

that the Bavarian authorities saw through this ruse, accusing him of revealing things they already knew and withholding what he knew they did not know. According to Ronneberger, the prosecutor then changed tactics. First he told Ronneberger that his violation of East German currency laws would earn him five years in prison. Then he invited Ronneberger to defect to West Germany, offering to bring his family over and find him a job as an economics expert.³⁸ Ronneberger maintained that he resisted these entreaties.

Like their West German counterparts, Ronneberger's superiors were caught between what they could prove and what they believed. Ronneberger's case officer and patron, Lieutenant-Colonel Wenzel, was convinced that he had remained loyal.³⁹ No doubt this conviction was based as much on his assessment of the agent he had been running for sixteen years as it was on his own career prospects, since Wenzel's credibility as a case officer now depended on demonstrating that Ronneberger was not a double agent. Just to be certain, however, Wenzel threatened Ronneberger, telling Ronneberger's wife that he would shoot her husband himself if he betrayed the GDR. Or at least this is what Ronneberger claims in his memoirs.⁴⁰

Soon after Ronneberger's arrest, Wenzel worked hard to create the impression that Ronneberger 'displayed steadfastness during his imprisonment' and was resisting the siren song of the West.⁴¹ Yet even Wenzel realised that he could not explain away Ronneberger's willingness to participate in secret interrogations with representatives of the class enemy. To distract from this problem, Wenzel portrayed Ronneberger as a courageous victim of Western aggression, 'reliable and unwavering' despite the 'massive and extortionist' pressure the GDR's enemies brought to bear on him.⁴² In addition, Wenzel depicted Ronneberger's decision to accept the Bavarian

³⁸ Ibid., 114–19; and BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, Wenzel and Hartmann, 'Arbeitskonzeption für die Zusammenarbeit mit dem IMS "Saale"', 15 Aug. 1983, 261–2.

³⁹ Wenzel was head of Hauptabteilung (HA) XVIII/8, the electronics section of economic desk at the MfS. In 1989, HA XVIII had 2,140 unofficial informants at its disposal and was running fifteen agents in the West (Macrakis, 'Espionage and Technology Transfer', 87).

⁴⁰ Ronneberger, *Deckname 'Saale'*, 22.

⁴¹ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, Oberstleutnant Wenzel, 'Vorschläge für weitere Aktivitäten zur Aufhebung der widerrechtlichen Inhaftierung des Genossen Ronneberger, stellvertretenden Generaldirektors des AHB Elektronik', 6 April 1982, 100.

⁴² BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, 'Bericht zur Rückkehr des stellvertretenden Generaldirektors des AHB Elektronik Export-Import, Genossen Ronneberger, aus der BRD', 30 Aug. 1982, 121; and BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, 'Operative Einschätzung', 25 Oct. 1982, 161. Wenzel also supplied an analysis of the political context surrounding Ronneberger's arrest, which he interpreted as the result of an alliance between Bavarian conservatives and US officials to force tighter West German legal measures against imports to the GDR. On this reading, Ronneberger was a victim of a conspiracy between Western reactionaries to crack down on illegal technology transfer (BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, Oberstleutnant Wenzel, 'Vorschläge für weitere Aktivitäten zur Aufhebung der widerrechtlichen Inhaftierung des Genossen Ronneberger, stellvertretenden Generaldirektors des AHB Elektronik', 6 April 1982, 103). Wenzel was certainly correct that Ronneberger's arrest was part of a West German response to pressure, coming as it did on the heels of the Carter administration's restrictions on exports to the USSR in retaliation for the invasion of Afghanistan; further US export restrictions after the 1981 declaration of martial law in Poland; the Reagan administration's launch of 'Operation Exodus', which represented a well-organised effort to prevent circumventions of COCOM regulations; and the August 1981 indictment of Werner

prosecutor's deal as a simple misidentification of his legal options based on ignorance. Besides, Wenzel assured his superiors, Ronneberger had surrendered no information of value.⁴³ To pre-empt potentially serious criticisms of his protégé, moreover, Wenzel rebuked Ronneberger for trying to outsmart the enemy. He recommended that it 'be made clear to comrade Ronneberger in further conversations that he overestimated himself in his behaviour towards the enemy, and that he must learn a personal lesson from it'.⁴⁴ In this manner, Wenzel constructed a criticism that had the effect of showcasing Ronneberger's loyalty.

In contrast, the Stasi officer charged with investigating Ronneberger, Lieutenant-Colonel Heinz Fickert, sought to avoid speculation where there was no evidence. Fickert noted that Ronneberger's own representation of his incarceration appeared to be 'honest', but he also emphasised that 'the details of his interrogations as described by the candidate cannot be evaluated with regard to his actual behaviour during the interrogations because there is no record of the interrogation protocols'. In the absence of corroborating evidence, Fickert recommended that Stasi officers work with Ronneberger to reconstruct his interrogations as a way of confirming 'the objectivity of the candidate's report'.⁴⁵ Through closer scrutiny of the internal contradictions in his testimony, Stasi officers might determine whether Ronneberger was trustworthy and learn how to inoculate their field agents against Western interrogation techniques. That is, Fickert believed that careful analysis of what little the MfS actually knew might yield some insight into the confusing tangle of Ronneberger's actions and intentions.

In the end, Wenzel's canny speculations trumped Fickert's scrupulous refusal to run ahead of available data. Erich Mielke, the minister for state security, preferred to overlook questions about Ronneberger's loyalty and close the case. He demanded

Bruchhausen, a West German who had been funnelling American semiconductor technology to the Soviet Union via the FRG and Austria (BStU, MfS HA XVIII, 13279, Kleine to Mittag, 16 Aug. 1988, 7; Alan P. Dobson, 'The Reagan Administration, Economic Warfare, and Starting to Close Down the Cold War', *Diplomatic History* 29, 3 (2005), 539–40; Macrakis, 'Espionage and Technology Transfer', 111–12; Robyn Shotwell Metcalfe, *The New Wizard War. How the Soviets Steal U.S. High Technology – And How We Give It Away* (Redmond, WA: Tempus Books, 1988), 1–7; John Palmer, 'The Alliance in Crisis?', *The Political Quarterly*, 59, 3 (1988), 311–20; Hélène Seppain, *Contrasting US and German Attitudes to Soviet Trade, 1917–91: Politics by Economic Means* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); and Seppain, 'The Divided West'). It is probably no coincidence that most of Ronneberger's West German conduits were Free Democrats, that this party deserted the left-liberal coalition in part because of policy differences over the GDR, that it helped bring the Christian Democrat Helmut Kohl to power in the FRG's first constructive vote of no confidence on 1 October 1982, or that Ronneberger was released a few days later.

⁴³ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, 'Bericht zur Rückkehr des stellvertretenden Generaldirektors des AHB Elektronik Export-Import, Genossen Ronneberger, aus der BRD', 30 Aug. 1982, 121; and BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, 'Operative Einschätzung', 25 Oct. 1982, 160.

⁴⁴ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, 'Operative Einschätzung', 25 Oct. 1982, 162.

⁴⁵ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, Fickert, 'Stellungnahme zum operativen Material der Hauptabteilung XVIII/8 entsprechend des vorliegenden Berichtes vom 30.09.1982 sowie beigefügten Dokumenten', 15 Oct. 1982, 148–9.

that Ronneberger receive the ‘Combat Citation for Service to People and Nation in Gold’, which was one of the GDR’s highest commendations. In its characteristically contradictory manner, however, the MfS agreed to commemorate Ronneberger’s heroic sacrifice, but only in a secret ceremony.⁴⁶ Nor did this undisclosed decoration banish questions about Ronneberger’s lengthy incarceration or how the MfS interpreted the information it collected. Although neither Wenzel nor Fickert made any mention of it, for example, the MfS had been tipped off before Ronneberger’s arrest that West German intelligence services were closely tracking his every move, which led Ronneberger to wonder if his superiors had not intentionally served him up as part of some larger and sinister plan.⁴⁷ For his part, Wenzel would continue to declare Ronneberger to be a reliable reporter of events, ‘which he honestly and thoroughly repeated, as in the past’.⁴⁸ But Wenzel also agreed that ‘it will be necessary to continue to monitor [Ronneberger] in the concrete execution of orders and to continue to study the motivations for his actions and behaviour’.⁴⁹ As the agency professed, ‘trust is good, but control is better’.⁵⁰

In his memoirs, Ronneberger claims that he remained a faithful agent of the East German secret police. Certainly, the files of the MfS disclose that, after his 1978 promotion to general director of the AHB Elektronik, the import–export subsidiary of the GDR’s most important microelectronic firm, Ronneberger made significant contributions to the East German industrial espionage programme, frequently and successfully circumventing Western restrictions on the import of hi-tech goods to the GDR. The cunning of his operational style, as well as his value to the MfS, is illustrated by his 1985 acquisition of a US laser-guided navigation system, which was designed to assist aircraft during landing but had implications for rocket telemetry. Rather than steal the technology outright and risk failure or detection, Ronneberger arranged for a West German businessman to purchase a plane equipped with the new technology and fly it to the GDR, where Soviet specialists removed the navigation system. The

⁴⁶ *Der Kampforden für Verdienste um Volk und Vaterland in Gold*. See BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 4, ‘Arbeitskonzeption für die Zusammenarbeit mit dem IMS “Saale”’, 260; and Ronneberger, *Deckname ‘Saale’*, 25.

⁴⁷ Whether his superiors failed to act on this information because of disloyalty towards Ronneberger or sheer incompetence, the quality of their sources is beyond dispute. Not only did the MfS receive information about Ronneberger from well-placed moles in the Federal Intelligence Service (Bundesnachrichtendienst), West Germany’s version of the CIA, but it was well informed about the involvement of the West German army’s Counterespionage Service (Militärischer Abschirmdienst) in his arrest. Even more impressive, the East Germans were able to monitor Ronneberger’s initial interrogations because they had a double agent on the spot. See BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, ‘Aktion des Landesamtes für Verfassungsschutz Westberlin, Information G/2451/20/02/82’, no date, 39–42; BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, ‘Operative Einschätzung’, 25 Oct. 1982, 159, 161; BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, ‘Bandabschrift eines Berichtes zur Fa. [X]/WB im Zusammenhang mit Ermittlungen einer Münchener Dienststelle’, 25 March 1982, 93–4; and Ronneberger, *Deckname ‘Saale’*, 40, 73–82.

⁴⁸ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, Wenzel and Hartmann, ‘Arbeitskonzeption für die Zusammenarbeit mit dem IMS “Saale”’, 15 Aug. 1983, 262.

⁴⁹ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, Wenzel, ‘Bericht über das Treffen mit dem IMS “Saale” am 19.11.1982 im Objekt “Moll”’, 22 Nov. 1982, 267.

⁵⁰ Childs and Poplewell, *The Stasi*, 88.

plane then returned to the FRG, where it was resold without the advanced guidance system.⁵¹ Through a clever act of omission, Ronneberger surreptitiously obtained a sought-after technological innovation.

Most of Ronneberger's missions required far less sophisticated methods to deceive West German officials, however. When ordering a CAD/CAM machine in 1985, for example, he simply mislabelled it, and then slipped the falsely identified description into the middle of an overly detailed bill of lading.⁵² Similarly, Ronneberger managed to ferry polished silicon wafers – 'an embargoed good that is extremely difficult to find' – across the border by falsifying the bill of sale.⁵³ In these cases Ronneberger escaped detection not by omitting the truth so much as misrepresenting it. Much of the time, however, the passing on of Western contraband was not nearly as simple or elegant. In one case, for example, an Austrian businessman and his grandson arrived in West Berlin by train, placed some electronic components in a locker at the Zoo station, and then brought the key to Ronneberger's office at the Haus der Elektronik in East Berlin.⁵⁴ In another case, his West German partner left smuggled goods in the boot of his car, which he parked in the garage of the Palasthotel in East Berlin.⁵⁵

Ronneberger always seemed to find Western partners who were willing to place profit margins above national security, despite constant US demands for tighter security measures, which only increased after the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. His biggest coup was probably the deal he struck with the Japanese firm Toshiba in 1985. In return for DM 25 million, he convinced Toshiba to furnish the equipment and know-how for the GDR to manufacture its own 256-kilobyte memory chips. Toshiba turned out to be an excellent business partner, delivering products, know-how and customer service with remarkable zeal.⁵⁶ In 1987, however, the CIA revealed that Toshiba had sold sophisticated lathes to the USSR that could craft nearly silent propellers and help Soviet submarines evade detection by drastically reducing their noise signatures.⁵⁷ Worried about being caught yet again in violation

⁵¹ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, Tonbandabschrift, 'Bericht über das Zusammentreffen mit [X] am 14. Juni 1985', 3 July 1985, 87.

⁵² BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, 'Bericht über die Verhandlungen mit [X] während der Leipziger Herbstmesse 1985', 2 Sept. 1985, 148.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵⁴ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, 'Bericht über eine Verhandlung mit Herrn [X] am 18.12.1985', no date, 193.

⁵⁵ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, Tonbandabschrift, 'Bericht über das Zusammentreffen mit [X] am 14. Juni 1985', 3 July 1985, 89.

⁵⁶ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 3, Ronneberger to Schalck and Nendel, 'Information', 10 Feb. 1988, 97–8; Klaus Krakat, 'Probleme der DDR-Industrie im letzten Fünfjahrplanzeitraum', in Eberhard Kuhrt, *Am Ende des realen Sozialismus. Die wirtschaftliche und ökologische Situation der DDR in den 80er Jahren*, vol. 2 (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1996), 161–2; and Przybylski, *Tatort Politbüro. Die Akte Honecker* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991), 128. Toshiba was the first company to produce 256-kb chips, which were the most advanced at the time. The GDR, however, was still struggling with 64-kb technology.

⁵⁷ Macrakis, 'Espionage and Technology Transfer', 115–16; and Metcalfe, *The New Wizard War*, 177–86. For the East German account, see BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 3, Ronneberger, AHB Elektronik Export-Import, 'Leiterinformation zu den Ergebnissen der Verhandlung mit der Fa. Toshiba zum Projekt 256K DRAM in Tokyo am 15. und 16.7.1987', 18 July 1987, 20–4; BStU, MfS

of COCOM restrictions, Toshiba offered to return 95 per cent of the money paid by the GDR if the East Germans agreed to destroy all evidence of the hi-tech deal, including the chip designs.⁵⁸ Under the watchful eyes of Toshiba's representatives, Ronneberger complied, breaking the templates and then bathing them in acid. But he had tricked his Japanese partners. The designs destroyed by the East Germans were merely copies that Ronneberger had fashioned specifically for this ruse. Thanks to his duplicity, the GDR was still in possession of the original templates.⁵⁹

Despite the lengths to which he went to obtain sensitive technologies, however, Ronneberger's cunning did not make the GDR more competitive. For one thing, Ronneberger paid 30 to 80 per cent more than the going rate for embargoed goods, which cut into the savings the GDR reaped on research and development.⁶⁰ More importantly, acquiring key equipment and expertise, even via duplicitous means, was not the same thing as manufacturing microchips. Creating the sterile environments necessary for chip production proved onerous, while bottlenecks characteristic of the planned economy delayed and disrupted mass production.⁶¹ Similarly, the GDR fell behind in the mass production of 16-bit microprocessors, which took place about four and a half years after West Germany took up manufacturing them and seven and a half years after their introduction in the United States; it was not until 1989 that the GDR was able to produce a 32-bit processor – one based on information stolen from the US corporation Intel.⁶² At least in the case of microchips and microprocessors, where it was necessary to master production of one level of technology before continuing on to the next, industrial espionage did not help the GDR to narrow the technological gap with the West.⁶³ Ronneberger's job, however, was to acquire the technological secrets of the West, not to put them to use.

Even more discouraging to SED leaders, the costs of production were astronomical. In all, the GDR sank 14 billion West German marks into developing its

AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 3, Günsel, HA XVIII/8/3, Treffbericht, 17 Sept. 1987, 28; BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 3, Saale, Tonbandabschrift, 'Information zur Verhandlung mit der Fa. Toshiba am 5.9.1987 in Leipzig', 6 Sept. 1987, 29–32.

⁵⁸ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 3, Helmut Schindler, 'Vermerk über ein Gespräch mit Toshiba am 15.1.1988 in Wien', 16 Jan. 1988, 90.

⁵⁹ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 3, Ronneberger to Schalck and Nendel, 'Information', 10 Feb. 1988, 97–8; Krakat, 'Probleme der DDR-Industrie', 161–2; Przybylski, *Tatort Politbüro*, 128.

⁶⁰ Macrakis, 'Espionage and Technology Transfer', 113.

⁶¹ At the GDR's unveiling of its one-megabyte chip, for example, the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev asked when mass production would begin. Embarrassed, the East Germans quickly ushered him away (Jeffrey Kopstein, *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945–1989* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 101).

⁶² Krakat, 'Probleme der DDR-Industrie', 162–3; Hans-Herrmann Hertle, 'Die Diskussion der ökonomischen Krisen in der Führungsspitze der SED', in Theo Pirker, M. Rainer Lepsius, Rainer Weinert, and Hans-Herrmann Hertle, eds., *Der Plan als Befehl und Fiktion. Wirtschaftsführung in der DDR* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1995), 335–6; and Macrakis, 'Espionage and Technology Transfer', 116. For the growing technological gap between the West and the USSR, see Metcalfe, *The New Wizard War*, 81–8.

⁶³ Kristie Macrakis, 'Does Effective Espionage Lead to Success in Science and Technology? Lessons from the East German Ministry for State Security', *Intelligence & National Security*, 19, 1 (March 2004), 52–77.

microelectronic sector, with little return. A single 256-kb microchip cost more than 566 East German marks to make – and that was not even counting the various hidden subsidies embedded in the manufacturing process. In order to encourage domestic adoption of the new technology, the party offered the chips to East German producers at a discounted price of 17 marks. But even this heavily subsidised price compared poorly with the going rate in the European Community for similar chips, which fluctuated between 5 and 15 DM, or between 18 and 54 East German marks. And as always, questions about product reliability and quality control clung to East German merchandise.⁶⁴ In addition, the increasing specialisation and flexibility offered by computer-assisted machines accelerated the trend away from standardised products and towards customised manufacturing. If the GDR could not master the challenges of Fordist production techniques, how could it match the post-Fordist, flexible production techniques of US, Japanese, and Taiwanese manufacturers?⁶⁵ Nor is it clear how SED leaders would have dealt with the destabilising proliferation of electronic media, given that their power was based in no small part on restricting how individual actors communicated.⁶⁶ Just saying ‘no’, as Mielke did to the possibility of importing photocopying machines in 1988, hardly constituted a policy towards the communications revolution.⁶⁷

It would be misleading, however, to depict Ronneberger’s covert operations as unalloyed successes that were cancelled out by the shortcomings of East German science and industry or the delusions of MfS leaders (as Ronneberger does in his memoirs). A large number of operational failures were also linked to Ronneberger himself. For one thing, Ronneberger seemed unable to keep secrets. In 1985, for example, the Deutsche Aussenhandelsbank, an East German bank charged with financing the GDR’s exports and imports, was supposed to send a letter of credit to a Swiss bank used by a West German businessman who was selling embargoed electronic components to the GDR. But the Aussenhandelsbank inexplicably sent the letter to the wrong Swiss bank – the Internationale Genossenschaftsbank in Basel. The Genossenschaftsbank dutifully opened an account in the name of the West German businessman and notified his company in writing that it had received a letter of credit guaranteeing payment for ‘electronic components’. As Ronneberger’s West German partner pointed out, the Aussenhandelsbank’s incompetence not only disrupted the

⁶⁴ BArchB, DE1, 56318, ‘Eine Bemerkung zu der Frage’, 30 Aug. 1988, 3; Günter Schabowski, *Der Absturz* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991), 126; Buthmann, *Kadersicherung*, 25–9; Hertle, ‘Die Diskussion’, 332–6; Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 73–6; and Zatlín, *The Currency of Socialism*, ch. 4. For all of these reasons, Macrakis’ assertion that ‘the GDR did indeed save on research and development costs’ is well taken, but beside the point (Macrakis, ‘Espionage and Technology Transfer’, 101). In converting West German prices to East German marks, I made use of the SED’s official exchange rate, which was 3.6 East German marks = 1 West German mark in 1986. The black market rate at this time was more than 5:1 (Zatlín, *The Currency of Socialism*, 169).

⁶⁵ Maier, *Dissolution*, 75.

⁶⁶ On the use of the petition system to prevent East Germans from organising along common interests, see Zatlín, *The Currency of Socialism*, ch. 7.

⁶⁷ BStU, MfS HA XVIII 10609, Mielke, ‘Erweiterung der Verfügungsmöglichkeiten’, 30 Sept. 1988, 4.

financing of the deal but also placed him at risk, since the conscientious work by the wrong bank had created a record of an illegal deal that could be discovered by West German security agents.⁶⁸ So worried was he by this East German indiscretion that he threatened to terminate the relationship if it ever happened again. Similarly, a representative of the West German company Industrie-Vertrieb Heidler complained in the autumn of 1985 that Ronneberger's office had inexplicably sent him a telegram mentioning the delivery of computer parts. 'This kind of thing cannot happen again', he warned Ronneberger, because 'it poses great danger.'⁶⁹

Concern also swirled around Ronneberger because of the myriad leaks attributed to his office. In 1984 senior Stasi officers expressed great alarm at 'proof of infiltration of embargo distribution channels by imperialist secret services', but were unable to demonstrate conclusively that Ronneberger was at fault.⁷⁰ In 1988, renewed suspicions that he was tipping off West German agents as to the GDR's covert acquisition of embargoed hi-tech goods led Ronneberger's superiors to demand that he account for the leaks emanating from his office and devise a reliable method of preventing the disclosure of sensitive information. In his defence, Ronneberger replied baldly that contact with Westerners inevitably invited indiscretion. He attributed the success of the GDR's enemies in compiling a 'mosaic' of East German industrial needs to their ability to manipulate his colleagues' ignorance, inexperience, complacency and desire for status – 'especially the ambition to have an answer to every question'. In addition, Western businessmen often made small gifts that subtly influenced East German behaviour, or worse, made his colleagues vulnerable to blackmail. To seal loose lips, Ronneberger recommended an astonishingly obvious approach. East Germans working with capitalist suppliers, he suggested, ought to learn to identify conflicts of interest with the West, improve their technical qualifications, learn to suppress their desire for social status, stop flapping their mouths and become more disciplined.⁷¹ By portraying them as inevitable, Ronneberger effectively trivialised the concerns of his superiors and successfully forestalled the implementation of clear procedures that would bring more transparency to his activities – and place greater limitations on his freedom of manoeuvre. Strangely, his cheeky response elicited no rebuke.

These leaks, however, were nothing compared with the operational disasters linked to Ronneberger's office. In 1984, for example, Ronneberger negotiated the illegal transport of 15,855 silicon chips worth some DM 660,000 across the border, which

⁶⁸ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, 'Bericht über die Verhandlungen mit Herrn [X] am 30.11.85 im Palasthotel', no date, 182.

⁶⁹ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, 'Bericht über eine Verhandlung mit Herrn [X] Firma Industrie-Vertrieb Heidler BRD', no date, 191.

⁷⁰ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 3, HA XVIII/8, 'Erkenntnisse aus der politisch-operativen Arbeit zum Sicherungsschwerpunkt "Embargo" und Schlußfolgerungen aus Maßnahmen des Gegners', 2 Oct. 1984, 166. A similar concern would ultimately lead to Wenzel advocating Ronneberger's dismissal in 1989 (BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 4, 'Zum Schutz des Genossen Gerhard Ronneberger', no date, 180–1).

⁷¹ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 3, IMS Saale, Tonbandabschrift, 'Antwort zur Anfrage: "Gefahrensituation bei nicht korrekter Verhaltensweise von Mitarbeitern im Bauelementenbereich"', 6 June 1988, 141–3.

he elected to carry out in a camper van under the cover of night. Once he had crossed into the GDR and reached the safety of Erfurt, the camper's driver stopped at a hotel to sleep. About two hours later, the camper burst into flames, destroying nearly half of the delivery, or about DM 250,000-worth of the chips. Although senior officers suspected sabotage, they could find no evidence to support the charge.⁷² It was possible, after all, that the culprit was simply the poor quality of East German automotive vehicles.

Even more bizarre was the theft of Ronneberger's car in 1978, when a man claiming to be a Stasi agent named Lieutenant Zelk appeared at Ronneberger's house looking for him. Although Zelk's papers identified him as an army rather than a Stasi officer, Ronneberger claimed that he saw no reason to distrust him, not least because Zelk's 'entire behaviour could be classified as emphatically confident'. Zelk told Ronneberger that his car had been found on the transit highway to West Germany 250 kilometres north of Berlin, sporting Munich licence plates. According to Ronneberger, Zelk said that he believed that the car had been used to help people flee the GDR. After asking Ronneberger if he was familiar with a particular suspect, Zelk requested that he surrender the title and keys to the car. Rather surprisingly, Ronneberger complied. Because the last two pages of the report are missing, it is unclear what exactly had transpired, other than that 'Zelk' stole Ronneberger's car, which had indeed been used to help in smuggling East Germans over the border.⁷³ Ronneberger's astonishing lack of attention to crucial details, as well as his unbelievable gullibility, raises suspicions of conspiracy. But his superiors mysteriously declined the invitation to investigate further.

It might have been possible to explain away these failed missions and strange incidents were it not for the fact that, despite his considerable talents, Ronneberger had been dogged by unresolved questions about his political reliability from the start of his career. In a society where social background could determine whether one studied at university or not, for example, Ronneberger's origins were suspect. Both his father and his brother had been members of the Nazi party. Gerhardt himself had been too young to join, rescued from the choice by the 'mercy of a late birth', as West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl was to put it.⁷⁴ Although he was awarded the Ernst Thälmann medal for his part in a demonstration against West German remilitarisation during the 1951 World Festival of Socialist Youth, he never quite overcame questions

⁷² BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 2, IMS Saale, 'Information für Gen. Dr. Schalck – Brand Embargoware Si-Scheiben', 16 April 1984, 72–3. One interesting consequence was that Ronneberger could not apply for disaster funds made available by the State Planning Commission for such emergencies, since he would have had to explain what he was importing. The explanation would have revealed his activities to East German economic officials, who supposedly knew nothing about the Stasi's industrial espionage programme.

⁷³ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, HA VIII/2, 'Besondere Vorkommnis am 9.6.1978 im Berliner Büro – CZ', 10 June 1978, 191–2; and BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, HA VIII/2, 'Information zu [X]', 12 June 1978, 193–7.

⁷⁴ His father, a locomotive operator, eventually joined the SED. Ronneberger was born on 4 March 1934 in Saalfeld (BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 1, 49, 53, 160–2).

about his political motivations.⁷⁵ Thus he claimed to have joined the People's Police (Volkspolizei) voluntarily and even received a commendation for his service, which one Stasi officer interpreted as 'an expression [of] his positive attitude to the policy of our Republic'.⁷⁶ On the other hand Ronneberger not only left the police abruptly in 1956, but he also refused to serve in the army, which was viewed as evidence of his disloyalty. In fact, his superiors at the People's Police accused Ronneberger of 'inadequate ideological firmness and . . . personal egotism'.⁷⁷

Perhaps to compensate for potential criticisms of his political reliability, perhaps because he was attracted to an authoritarian youth organisation that superficially resembled the Hitler Youth he knew well, Ronneberger joined the Free German Youth movement in 1949. In 1950, he joined the German–Soviet Friendship Association. In 1954 he became a candidate for membership of the SED, and in 1955 a full member.⁷⁸ But the reservations about him persisted. Early on, one of his superiors noted in his personnel file that 'his main weakness consisted of his belief, based on his technical expertise and intelligence, that he did not need the direction, guidance, or help of the collective'.⁷⁹ In the GDR, unpleasant personal traits, such as Ronneberger's apparent conviction that he was better able to solve problems than others, were quickly politicised. By the mid-1970s, however, a Stasi officer investigating Ronneberger's allegiances could remark approvingly that Ronneberger's tendency to 'believe he could ignore the directions and help of the collective because of his technical expertise and intelligence has no longer been apparent in the last few years. Similarly, his tendency towards a certain condescension has subsided'.⁸⁰ It is more difficult to explain the official reprimand issued to Ronneberger by the party (*strenge Rüge als Parteistrafe*) in October 1981, which constituted a serious blot on his record, simply as the consequence of a resurgent arrogance.⁸¹ It is certainly possible, given his family's membership of the Nazi party, that he was politically unreliable, but it is just as likely that he was loyal to the GDR, as he claims in his memoirs, or that he avoided ideologies, like many of his generation, and was simply interested in career advancement.

⁷⁵ The Thälmann medal, which was awarded to East German youth to promote political activism and the GDR's anti-fascist self-understanding, was named for the German communist leader, Ernst Thälmann, who was executed on Hitler's orders at Buchenwald in August 1944. For more on the 1951 festival, which had a significant political impact on East German youth, and the allegations that West Berlin authorities used excessive force to turn back the demonstration, see Joël Kotek, 'Youth Organizations as a Battlefield in the Cold War', *Intelligence & National Security* 18, 2 (2003), 168–91.

⁷⁶ On 5 July 1956, Ronneberger was awarded a 'Special Citation for Honorable Service in the Barracked People's Police' (*Ehrenurkunde für ehrenvolle Dienste in der kasiernierten Volkspolizei*) (*ibid.*, 49, 53; and BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, HA XVIII/8, Leutnant Ondrusch, 'Vorschlag zur Bestätigung als Reisekader', 30 Jan. 1976, 182, 183).

⁷⁷ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, HA XVIII/8, Leutnant Ondrusch, 'Vorschlag zur Bestätigung als Reisekader', 30 Jan. 1976, 183.

⁷⁸ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91 Teil I, Band 1, 49, 53, 160–2.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸⁰ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 1, HA XVIII/8, Leutnant Ondrusch, 'Vorschlag zur Bestätigung als Reisekader', 30 Jan. 1976, 184–5.

⁸¹ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, HA VIII/2, Parteigruppe I, AHB Elektronik Export-Import, 14 Sept. 1982, 232.

In their efforts to make sense of the contradictions surrounding Ronneberger, his superiors periodically made categorical statements aimed at settling the question and placing Ronneberger's loyalty above suspicion. In 1977, for example, Wenzel asserted that Ronneberger was 'unconditionally' forthcoming about all attempts by capitalist businessmen to bribe him or his wife, from a 1977 offer to open a secret bank account for him in Austria to gifts of a fur coat for his wife and recordings of Western music for his children in 1985.⁸² But allegations continued to follow Ronneberger that he and his wife accepted presents 'in large amounts' from foreign business partners and even let their 'specific desires', such as velvet curtains, be known to Western businessmen, contradicting his assessment.⁸³

At times, Wenzel even disguised second-hand observation as fact. After a secret investigation of Ronneberger in 1975, for example, Wenzel concluded that 'comrade R[onneberger] and his wife too are considered absolutely reliable politically'.⁸⁴ Similarly, Wenzel's sources claimed that Ronneberger was 'considered a devoted father who is attentive and helpful to his spouse. He always brings the children small presents from his business trips abroad'.⁸⁵ The Stasi's interest in Ronneberger as paterfamilias and faithful husband was not simply a matter of reassuring themselves that he was not vulnerable to blackmail. The MfS had its own vision of sexual propriety and public grace, which included the proper mixture of social hygiene and heterosexual manliness. Deviation was not tolerated, and agents working at the economics desk were dismissed for a variety of transgressions, including alcoholism, 'immaturity of character' and the 'incorrect selection of a partner'. One officer was even fired for 'capitulative behaviour in front of his wife' because he acceded to her wish to resist being transferred to Leipzig from Berlin.⁸⁶ For these reasons Wenzel was concerned to demonstrate that, as another source confirmed, Ronneberger upheld 'all moral standards . . . at home and abroad'.⁸⁷ Of course hearsay is vital to shaping people's perceptions of reality, and is thus a staple of spy work. But it is no substitute for evidence. Despite what Wenzel heard, Ronneberger was having an affair with a colleague in his firm. Worse still, she was arrested in 1979 as an American spy.⁸⁸

⁸² BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, HA VIII/2, 'Einschätzung des IMS 'Saale' im Ergebnis der Maßnahmen zur Überprüfung des IMS vom 3.5.1977', 28 Nov. 1977, 169–3; BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, 'Information über die Warenanlieferung von [X] am 30.12.85 in Erfurt', no date, 190; and BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil II, Band 1, IMS Saale, Tonbandabschrift, 'Bericht über das Zusammentreffen mit [X] am 14. Juni 1985', 3 July 1985, 86.

⁸³ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 4, HA XVIII/8, 'Fallinformation über Mitarbeiter des AHB Elektronik Import/Export', 1 Aug. 1988, 133.

⁸⁴ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 1, HA XVIII/8, 'Wohngebietsermittlung', 29 Nov. 1975, 173.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁸⁶ Haendcke-Hoppe-Arndt, *Die Hauptabteilung XVIII.*, 109–10.

⁸⁷ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 1, HA XVIII/8, IMS Olaf, 'Genosse Ronneberger', 20 Oct. 1975, 176.

⁸⁸ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, HA VIII/2, 'Ergebnis der Überprüfung des IMS "Saale"', 11.5.78, 180. Ronneberger denies that he was sleeping with the woman (Ronneberger, *Deckname 'Saale'*, 22). She was arrested in the wake of the defection of Werner Stiller, a key Stasi agent at the economic desk, to the West.

When they were not trying to corroborate conflicting reports or evaluate hearsay, Ronneberger's superiors were forced to make sense of circumstantial evidence of his disloyalty. Despite his obvious value to the GDR, people close to him often turned out to be double agents. While Ronneberger was on assignment in Cairo, for example, his father-in-law defected. When a colleague in Cairo who had been working as a double agent for the CIA fled to the West, his superiors grew worried enough to send Ronneberger back to East Berlin. In his memoirs, Ronneberger vehemently denies betraying the GDR, although he admits that 'the suspicion that I had been contacted by the CIA was to follow me around for many years'.⁸⁹ The arrest of his mistress for treason certainly did not help.

In the hope of discovering clues to his real identity, the MfS placed him under continuous surveillance starting in the mid-1970s. Not only did field agents monitor his goings and comings, but they also periodically raided his apartment – veering from deliberate observation to sudden surprise in the hopes of coaxing conviction out of contingency.⁹⁰ Sometimes, they botched their reconnaissance operations, tipping Ronneberger off that he was being tailed. However, these invasive searches enabled the agents to discover the impressive array of Western electronic devices Ronneberger kept at home, from his reel-to-reel tape recorders and photocopier to his paper shredder, and to monitor the Western literature he read at home, even down to the West German pornography he had stashed in a drawer. But the searches never turned up any evidence of actual contact with Western spy agencies, with the one exception of a suspicious repair bill from a Western company that Wenzel quickly explained away.⁹¹ Even after a 1985 investigation into his political loyalties that ultimately cleared Ronneberger, his superiors continued to expend vast resources in an effort to discover the truth about his motivations. As late as April 1989, for example, they organised a well-co-ordinated surveillance operation designed to confirm whether Ronneberger actually did what he said he did in his reports. Apparently, he did.⁹² Increasingly desperate, they even shadowed his wife.⁹³

In the end, the MfS could prove nothing, but it took action nevertheless. After a new wave of West German arrests of businessmen who had worked closely with

⁸⁹ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 1, Persönliche Niederschrift, 4 Sept. 1966, 114–15; BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, HA VIII/2, 'Einschätzung des IMS 'Saale' im Ergebnis der Maßnahmen zur Überprüfung des IMS vom 3.5.1977', 28 Nov. 1977, 167; and Ronneberger, *Deckname 'Saale'*, 22.

⁹⁰ See, for example, BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, HA VIII/2, 'Einschätzung des IMS "Saale" im Ergebnis der Maßnahmen zur Überprüfung des IMS vom 3.5.1977', 28 Nov. 1977, 168.

⁹¹ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, HA XVIII/8, 'Wohngebietsermittlung', 29 Nov. 1975, 173; and BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, HA VIII/2, 'Bericht über die durchgeführte konspirative Durchsuchung der Wohnung des Ronneberger Gerhard [sic]', 26 Aug. 1977, 80–3; and BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 4, no title, no date, 138.

⁹² BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 4, HA XVIII/8, 'Informationsbericht vom 07.04.1989', 7 April 1989, 151–2; and BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 4, Major Hartmann, Bezirksverwaltung Dresden, Abteilung VIII/5, to HA XVIII/8, Beobachtungsbericht, 10 April 1989, 158.

⁹³ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 4, Abteilung 26/7, 'Information A 70508/89/1–3/89', 22 June 1989, 170.

Ronneberger, a strange incident in which a West German ‘television crew’ tried to ‘film’ him at his holiday house, and Ronneberger’s own odd reaction to their presence, Wenzel was ready to pull the plug. He drafted an order to relieve Ronneberger of his post. Only the East German revolution of 1989 beat him to it.⁹⁴

For his part, Ronneberger maintains that he supported the GDR with ‘the deepest inner conviction’.⁹⁵ After the collapse of German communism had swept away the Stasi and Ronneberger was able to see the file Wenzel kept on him, he claimed that ‘it was in part shocking and painful for me to learn that this state – or at least some of its servants – mistrusted me that much’.⁹⁶ While he was hardly that naive, Ronneberger may well have been that loyal while the GDR still existed. He has been disloyal, however, to the GDR’s memory. Ronneberger’s memoirs, for example, hardly make the MfS, much less the GDR, look as good as its leaders would have liked. Perhaps for that reason, his exposé has sold relatively well. In contrast, Wenzel, who was to all appearances a convinced communist, committed suicide as the GDR and the picture of the world furnished by the MfS collapsed around his head. Although vision ruled in the Workers’ and Peasants’ State, it has no place in a Germany unified under capitalist auspices.

In his famously opaque commentary on Edgar Allen Poe’s detective story ‘The Purloined Letter’, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan discusses what lies in plain sight in terms of the *politique d’autruche*, or the ostrich’s belief that it can hide by sticking its head in the ground.⁹⁷ Like other espionage agencies, the MfS had a paranoid belief in its ability to uncover the secrets of others without revealing anything of itself. This article has argued that the Stasi’s specific brand of ocular authoritarianism entailed a contradictory approach to the hide-and-seek of espionage. If spying on one’s neighbour is premised on the notion that appearance is not always identical to reality, the contradiction between sight and vision embodied by the MfS threatened to exhaust itself in fruitless attempts to resolve epistemological puzzles. Worse still, the solutions the Stasi did work out were deprived of meaning by the party’s monopoly on policy making. Not only was the field agent’s unwillingness to rule out any empirical question at odds with the leadership’s willingness to retreat into belief whenever the data posed an ideological challenge, but the many successes produced by the Stasi failed to improve the East German economy. Asked by the party to compensate for the GDR’s inability to close the technological gap with the West, field agents like Ronneberger successfully obtained the closely held secrets of the West. But possessing those secrets was not the same as understanding them, just

⁹⁴ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 4, HA XVIII/8/13, ‘Vermerk zur Absprache mit dem Ltr. der Abt. II/13 Gen. Schaffner’, 31 July 1989, 172–4; BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 4, Ronneberger, ‘Information’, 24 July 1989, 175; BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 4, ‘Zum Schutz des Genossen Gerhardt Ronneberger’, no date, 180–1; and Ronneberger, *Deckname ‘Saale’*, 369.

⁹⁵ Ronneberger, *Deckname ‘Saale’*, 378.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 369. See also *ibid.*, 7–9, 368–73, 408–9.

⁹⁷ Jacques Lacan, ‘Le séminaire sur “La lettre volée”’, 44.

as observing was not the same as participating. The Stasi guarded the SED's back as the party hid its head, but believed it was invisible as it did so.

Ronneberger's career also suggests that knowledge is not the same as power, but that confidence in the tale, if not the teller, is. The Stasi leadership's inability to establish Ronneberger's loyalty with any certainty was not the product of a visual pathology that is amenable to institutional adjustment, methodological improvement or ideological preference.⁹⁸ Rather, the behaviour of Ronneberger's superiors was the result of an impatience with interpretive ambiguity – an intolerance of uncertainty that resulted in the authoritarian imposition of meaning on potentially disruptive data. The atmosphere of excessive worry about national security, heightened by the pressure of defending against the unknown, the conspiratorial nature of clandestine activities and a paranoid belief in invisible causation, led MfS officers and agents to believe the worst about their enemies. Thus they had no qualms about treating 'the West' as a monolithic subject, even though they understood that on the question of export restrictions the West Germans did not see eye to eye with the Americans, and that Rhenish liberals were more inclined to look the other way than Bavarian conservatives. In contrast, their radical scepticism faltered when dealing with one of their own. For this reason, Ronneberger's potentially harmless failure to divulge that he was on intimate terms with his West German defence lawyer during his 1982 incarceration became in Wenzel's view a sinister omission. And yet Wenzel continued to proclaim Ronneberger's innocence.⁹⁹

It is tempting to agree with the observation of that great commentator on central European bureaucracy, Franz Kafka, that 'all human errors are impatience, a premature breaking off of methodical procedure, an apparent fencing-in of what is apparently at issue'.¹⁰⁰ It does seem that Stasi officers remained unaware of their procedural prejudices and assumed that the process of selecting what is treated as (relevant) factual information is independent of narrative choice.¹⁰¹ As anyone who attempts to reassemble the chain of past events can testify, however, history is context, but narrative ellipsis. For the spy, as for the historian, it would be well to resist the temptation to transform Kafka's observation into a normative criticism of method. No amount of patient vigilance can scale the wall of human cognition, nor relentless consistency unmask affect and memory, which disrupt interpretive authority in unforeseen ways. Indeed, the interpretative process is always beset by a dearth of knowledge and a surfeit of meaning. Like Ronneberger at the beginning of this story, whose car key

⁹⁸ Betts, 'Analysis, War, and Decision', 62–3.

⁹⁹ BStU, MfS AIM, 10823/91, Teil I, Band 2, Wenzel, 'Bericht über das Treffen mit dem IMS "Saale" am 19.11.1982 im Objekt "Moll"', 22 Nov. 1982, 267. The fancy defence lawyer, who was close enough to Ronneberger to use the familiar 'Du', had been recommended to East German authorities by a member of Siemens's managing board.

¹⁰⁰ Franz Kafka, 'Betrachtungen über Sünde, Leid, Hoffnung und den wahren Weg', in Franz Kafka, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prosa aus dem Nachlaß* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1983), 30.

¹⁰¹ On the historian's encounter with narrative choice, see Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', in Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 1–25.

was broken off in a moment of pre-emptive patience, spies and historians often find their methodological tools imperfect at best. In the analytic end, moreover, interpretive choice entails an important narrative loss. Elsewhere, Kafka describes this loss in terms of desire: 'Differences in perspective that you can have, for example, of an apple: the point of view of a little boy who has to crane his neck to glimpse the apple on the table, and the point of view of the master of the house, who takes the apple and freely hands it to the person sitting at the table with him.'¹⁰² As Wenzel and Ronneberger learned in 1989, it is not the vision of the apple but its loss that makes for all the difference in interpretation.

¹⁰² Kafka, 'Betrachtungen über Sünde, Leid, Hoffnung und den wahren Weg', 31.