

***The Stasi Poetry Circle: The Creative Writing Class that Tried to Win the Cold War***

By Philip Otterman (Faber and Faber, 2022), 201 pages, bibliography, index.

***The Matchmaker: A Spy in Berlin***

By Paul Vidich (Pegasus Crime, 2022), Kindle edition.

**Reviewed by J.E. Leonardson**

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Say what you will about the German Democratic Republic, but grim and determinedly repressive as they were, the GDR's leaders truly believed in the power of literature to elevate the cultural consciousness of the people. From the moment they returned from Moscow in the summer of 1945, the communists were determined to start a post-Nazi cultural renaissance in the Eastern Zone. Such was the regime's dedication to this vision that factories were required to have on-site libraries—18,000–30,000 volumes with full-time librarians for enterprises of 5,000–10,000 workers, for example—while books and literary magazines poured off the presses for general circulation. To its credit, the GDR became a society of sophisticated readers, albeit only of officially approved works by authors who carefully toed the party line.

Another aspect of the artistic effort to build socialist utopia was to break down the barriers between intellectuals—considered inherently inclined toward bourgeois habits—and workers by assigning writers to factories and mines. This was no Maoist effort to reform intellectuals through manual labor. Rather, the writers established and led workplace-based Circles of Writing Workers that, following the regime's slogan to “Pick up the quill, comrade!” sought to create working peoples' literature. These, too, were an unlikely success, with writers' circles spreading throughout the country and several hundred still in operation when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989.

The Stasi, the GDR's notorious secret police, was not about to fall behind in these programs and by 1960 had established its own Circle of Writing Chekists. The effort seems to have been less successful than the Stasi leadership hoped, however, and in the late 1970s they concluded that the “discrepancy between aspiration and reality” had to be addressed. Uwe Berger, a professional poet and writer, was hired in 1982 to run the Circle and bring discipline and structure to the literary efforts of the secret police.

What happened next is the focus of German journalist Philip Ottermann's account. Thoroughly researched and beautifully written, *The Stasi Poetry Circle* is a fascinating tale filled with irony, tragedy, black humor, and the efforts of ordinary people to express their hopes. It has to be one of the most unusual intelligence histories ever written and illuminates a corner of the spy world that few could imagine, let alone know, existed.

Berger, in Ottermann's telling, was an intriguing figure. One of East Germany's literary leaders, he took his Stasi job seriously and in monthly meetings instructed the members of the Circle in the structures, techniques, and analysis of poetry. His students, in turn, worked on poems of their own. One, Alexander Ruika, seems to have had true talent but most wrote poetry generously described as regrettable. For example, “Night Shift,” by Björn Vogel:

Between night and morning  
A radio call  
Quickly!  
Frenzy.  
Phones ringing, teletypewriters chattering.  
Tired yawns, but excited concentration.  
Precise research through  
Accurately filed matter.  
Information  
To the comrades.  
Quiet pride—  
Mission completed  
In the struggle for peace.

Berger, however, was more than just another writer with a part-time teaching gig. He had risen to the top of the GDR's literary hierarchy, holding senior positions in the Writers' Union and Cultural Association, even though he never joined the party. Berger presented himself to the world as an ascetic artist dedicated to telling truth through poetry, and doing so independent of any political affiliation. This no doubt made him useful to the regime, but not half as useful as his clandestine life as a Stasi informer and cultural assassin.

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From 1970 until the collapse of the regime, Berger eagerly reported on all manner of topics, but especially on his fellow authors and even his Stasi poets. He was particularly happy to pen vicious criticism of any author whose writings he disliked or believed threatened to undermine the regime. In his report on one short story, Ottermann relates, Berger didn't stop at calling it an artistic failure, but instead went on about its "nihilistic, cynical, duplicitous attitude that without doubt takes on a counter-revolutionary quality." Criticism like that didn't just hurt sales, it destroyed lives, and in 1982 it earned Berger one of the Stasi's highest medals.

As slimy as he was, Berger understood a fundamental truth of his work. If poetry, undertaken properly, could raise the workers' consciousness and strengthen the regime, then the wrong type of poetry presented a dire threat. The problem, of course, is that poets tend to be politically unreliable people—even the average ones are creative and questioning types who cannot be counted upon to hew to an official line. Indeed, Ottermann relates the stories of several poets and writers who were hounded by the Stasi and, as well, how the Stasi used its own poets—Ruika was one—to monitor suspect writers.

The unreliability of artists, however, eventually became an internal problem for the Stasi. In 1984, Gerd Knauer, a young propaganda officer and member of the Circle, had become disillusioned with the regime's cavalier attitude toward the possibility of nuclear war. To express his concerns, Knauer wrote "The Bang," an epic poem of more than 20 pages that asked:

Who took a stand  
against this ghastly fate?  
Was there too little fear at hand?  
Did fear show up too late?

When Knauer read his poem to the Circle in June 1984, his fellow students sat in awed silence. Berger

praised his technique and all that his budding poets had learned, but later he unloaded his true views in his reports to his handlers. Knauer, he wrote, was "pig-headed" and "The Bang" was "at odds with his ideological mission." The young officer continued to churn out more suspect poetry, however, leading Berger to report in December 1984 that Knauer had become a saboteur who was "systematically obstructing the Circle of Writing Chekists." All intelligence services worry about insider threats, but the Stasi must stand alone in having created one made up of amateur poets.

One can speculate about where all this would have wound up had the East German regime not imploded in 1989, but the reality is that the work of the Circle of Writing Chekists was quickly forgotten. An anthology of their poems in honor of the 40th anniversary of the GDR was approved to be published on December 31, 1989, but it never saw the light of day; surviving copies of previous collections are now to be found only in the deepest recesses of German used-book stores. Uwe Berger died in 2014, and the Stasi poets went on to other occupations (Björn Vogel is now, among other things, a COVID-19 conspiracy theorist). In recovering their story and recording a strange episode in intelligence history, Philip Ottermann has done us a great favor.

Readers interested in more about the Stasi should look for Paul Vidich's novel *The Matchmaker*. Set in Berlin in the fall and winter of 1989–90, as the GDR was collapsing, the plot concerns a civilian interpreter for the US military, Anne Simpson, who learns her husband is a Stasi illegal. She becomes a pawn in the CIA's effort to take down the mastermind of the operation. While toward the end Vidich borrows scenes from *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, overall *The Matchmaker* is tightly written and carefully plotted. It grabs you in the first pages and never lets go.



*The reviewer:* JE Leonardson is the pen name of a CIA analyst and regular *Studies* contributor.