Once the post–World War II division of Europe had entrenched itself, the enormous risks of challenging the status quo through military force meant that all parties sought alternative ways of contesting the Cold War. Two new books shed light on the kinds of alternative strategies used by the West to undermine East Germany. One such strategy was the secret struggle conducted in the world of espionage; the other was the public battle for recognition and legitimacy conducted in the world of diplomacy. John Fahey, a U.S. naval commander who spent two years spying on the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and William Glenn Gray, a Cold War historian, describe clandestine and diplomatic attempts to subvert not only the GDR but also the Soviet Union.

Fahey served in the U.S. Military Liaison Mission (USMLM), which was responsible for maintaining contact with the Soviet forces stationed in East Germany. The organization existed because of an agreement reached between the United States and the USSR in April 1947. This agreement, and parallel accords with France and Britain, enabled 126 U.S., British, French, and Soviet military personnel accredited to their respective missions to travel unhindered throughout enemy territory. Of course the notion that spies could travel unhindered was a rule observed mainly in the breach, but it did nonetheless provide agents with legitimate cover for their presence on the territory of the “other side.” Fahey held one of the slots at a particularly interesting time, from May 1960 to July 1962.

Fahey's book has an extremely narrow focus on his personal experiences during this period. Larger questions of politics, strategy, and culture do not enter into his account. His view of events is straightforward—he did his job, they did theirs, and mostly everyone got home safely. Licensed to Spy reads like a diary, recounting its author's experiences in a chronological fashion. When the tour of duty ends, so does the book.

Nonetheless, some of the stories Fahey tells remind us of the absurdities and tragedies of the Cold War on the micro level. For example, he provides a memorable description of his first orientation tour through the GDR. Presumably with great relief, his senior colleagues assigned the newcomer the job of collecting materials left behind by Soviet troops after training exercises—which meant their used toilet paper (the Soviet military cleaned up everything else). Because the troops were forced to use not only the defense newspaper Krasnaya zvezda but also their letters from home for their personal needs, the USMLM considered the soggy droppings worth reading for indications of troop morale. As Fahey recalls, “Though neither of us had gloves, [my commanding officer] was unconcerned and eagerly stuffed his spoils into [our] vehicle's
trunk. When the trunk was full he began to throw the soiled paper into the back seat where I was to sit during the remainder of the two-day tour” (p. 15). On a sadder note, Fahey recounts the tragic story of an East German boy who was spotted leaping onto a moving train headed West on Thanksgiving Day 1961. Soviet officials insisted on the boy’s return, and Fahey recounts with bitterness how the United States gave in. Neither of these stories changed the course of history, but they serve as reminders of the bizarre nature of the Cold War even as it recedes further into the past.

William Gray’s book, in contrast, draws not on personal recollections at the micro level but on nearly exhaustive research in thirteen different archives to trace diplomacy at the macro level. As a result, The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany will serve as the definitive volume on West Germany’s attempts to isolate the GDR diplomatically via the Hallstein Doctrine. When the West German foreign ministry announced in 1955 that it would break relations with any country that recognized the GDR, it revealed its concern for the power of diplomacy as a legitimizing force. The GDR sought to compensate for its lack of domestic legitimacy by securing international recognition, and Gray spells out in detail how the Hallstein Doctrine sought (ultimately unsuccessfully) to foil East Germany in its quest.

Gray’s detailed account of West German politics raises intriguing questions now that the subject of occupation is again in the headlines. As Gray explains, West Germany increasingly enjoyed a great deal of autonomy and sovereignty in policymaking after 1950. (The North Korean invasion of South Korea that year convinced the Western allies of the need to let West Germany become a strong partner in order to defend itself against a potential similar invasion via East Germany). The key transition from occupation to relative autonomy occurred at noon on 5 May 1955, when the Paris Treaties heralded the dissolution of the Allied High Commission and the admission of West Germany into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as an ally of equal standing. As Gray explains, “with certain restrictions—regarding Berlin, the problem of unification, and the manufacture of atomic, biological and chemical weapons—the Federal Republic now enjoyed complete freedom in its internal and external affairs” (p. 30).

The result of the Paris Treaties was an unusual kind of shared sovereignty, whereby West Germany enjoyed a certain amount of policymaking independence within limits. The development of the Hallstein Doctrine, as Gray details, shows the leeway for independent policy planning that Bonn enjoyed within the larger framework set by the Americans, the British, and the French. Perhaps there are lessons here for the United States as it struggles to devolve authority in Iraq without losing a significant degree of control over the country’s fate. The U.S.–West German relationship after 1955 shows that viable alternatives exist between occupation and the full return of sovereignty.

Both books are extremely detailed and will be of use primarily for specialists. Nonetheless, they contribute to our understanding of the Cold War both from below and from above and remind us of the challenges of occupation.