
Commentary on *Esther the Cold War Kitty* and the “Acoustic Kitty” Project

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The book *Esther the Cold War Kitty* is legendary. Written at the height of the Cold War, it was intended as propaganda for children in the West. Some historians suggest that the book was written by Soviet agents intending that the West would publish it and then suffer public embarrassment. Other historians dismiss this latter view as nonsense. For reasons that have not yet been made public, the book was never published. The true identity of the author has never been revealed.

We have obtained a copy -- one of the three copies known to be in existence -- of the book. As a public service, in this issue of the *Annals of Improbable Research*, we present three of its chapters: “Esther the Cold War Kitty,” “Esther and the Gear Factory,” and “Esther and the Oil Field.”

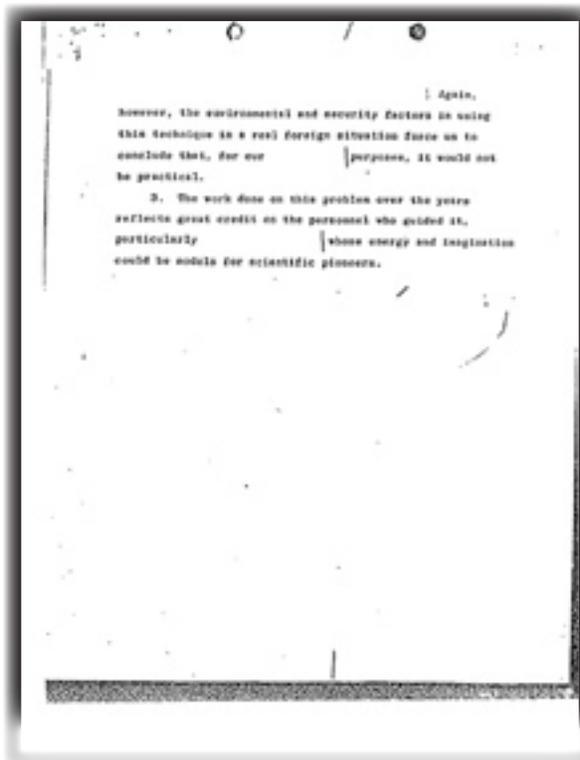
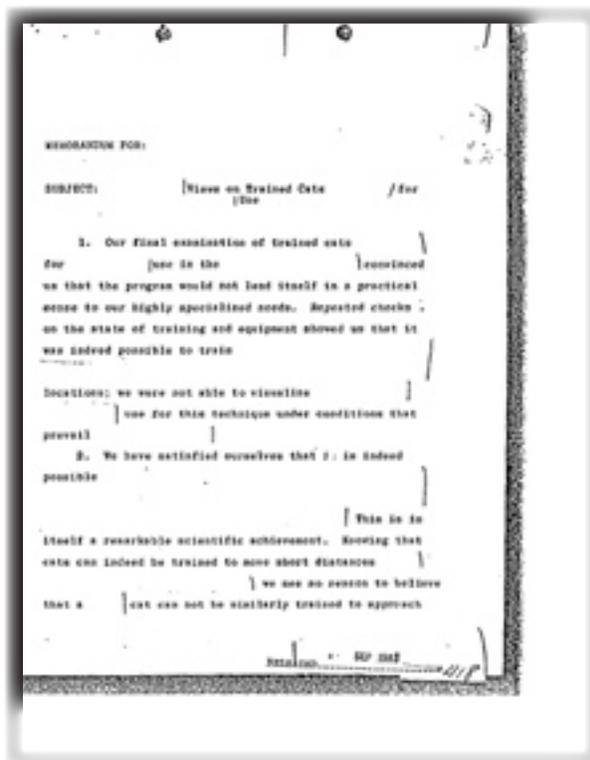
First, though, here is a perhaps relevant document produced by the CIA. It was made public under the Freedom of Information Act (the legwork in unearthing it was done by Jeffrey Richelson, a senior fellow at the National Security Archive in Washington). Shortly after its release in 2001, a report about it in *The Guardian* explained that:

[A] memo dated 1967 on “Views of Trained Cats” looks into the possibility of surgically inserting microphones and transmitters into cats and using them as walking bugs. The operation was codenamed “Acoustic Kitty” and was a resounding failure.

Having wired their first trained cat for sound, they released it near a park with strict orders to eavesdrop on two men on a bench, but the poor animal was run over by a taxi before it had taken more than a few steps towards its target.

The CIA researchers came to the conclusion that they could train cats to move short distances, but that “the environmental and security factors in using this technique in a real foreign situation force us to conclude that for our (intelligence) purposes, it would not be practical.”

A section of the document is reproduced below



Questions abound. Was the Acoustic Kitty project related to the *Esther the Cold War Kitty* book? Or was it in some way a reply to, or reaction against it? Was either project entirely the work of western operatives, or was one or both in some way an attempt by the Soviet Union to gull its rival into doing something that might look foolish to the American public? Perhaps we will never have definitive answers to any of these wonderings. Nonetheless, both *Esther the Cold War Kitty* and the Acoustic Kitty project are fascinating research objects for historians and students of international relations.

(Thanks to investigator Charles Bergquist for bringing the Acoustic Kitty project to our attention.)

Esther the Cold War Kitty

The cat's out of the bag -- almost literally -- now that the U.S. and Russia have declassified some of their cold-war spy reports. But until now, nobody has reported on the littlest, the warmest, the cuddliest, the most technologically surprising secret of them all. It is time for the world to know about Esther, the Cold War kitty.

Esther was the West's secret weapon. With her Minox subminiature camera, she kept an eye on the skulkings and plottings of the Soviet leadership. Josef Stalin, his successor Khrushchev, and the entire leadership of the KGB spy organization loved Esther. They treated her as an honored and pampered guest. They never suspected that the lovable, furry kitty-cat was a subminiature techno spy.

Esther's story is unlike any other. She was an ordinary cat, living an ordinary life, until one morning in 1947. Suddenly, through no fault of her own, Esther found herself on an airplane to Vienna.

In the years right after World War II, the Austrian capital city was a place of intrigue, seething with spies from the Soviet Union, England, the United States, France, and other glamorous countries.

The night before her adventure began, Esther had gone to sleep on a pile of nice, rumpled shirts. The shirts belonged to a house guest who just happened to be a top U.S. spy. When the spy packed his luggage in the pre-dawn darkness, he unknowingly packed Esther. Esther was notorious among her friends for being able to sleep through almost anything.

When she awoke the next day, Esther was in the American consulate in Vienna. The Ambassador and his favorite spy were delighted to meet Esther, and they spent several

minutes petting her and giving her treats. But the Ambassador and the spy were preoccupied with a problem. They couldn't figure out how to get inside the Soviet embassy and take photographs of the Soviet ambassador and *his* favorite spy.

Suddenly, the two men had a brainstorm. They would have Esther take the photos! Who would suspect an innocent-looking kitty of being a big-time spy? It was a brilliant idea.

The Ambassador showed Esther a very special camera. It was a beautiful little machine, a tiny, kitty-sized Minox (see photo below). The Minox had been designed a decade earlier in Latvia by a Swiss inventor named Walter Zapp. The camera was a mere 75 millimeters long, 13 millimeters high, and 28 millimeters wide -- just perfect for a cat. It weighed 180 grams, and used very small film, just 8 by 11 millimeters. With a Complan 15mm F3.5 (4Ele, 3Grp) lens, a Galilei Bright flame finder, a 0.2 - Infinity thumb wheel dial, shutter speeds from 1/2-1/1000 s, and the ability to shoot from as close as 0.2 m, the Minox was ideal for Esther. All it needed was a way for her to snap the shutter. Esther herself helped devise a paw-activated trip mechanism.



A Minox camera.

Esther was more lovable than any cat on the Continent. With the Minox strapped under her leg, she could go anywhere and take pictures of anything. And she did. Esther was a personal houseguest of both Stalin and Khrushchev. She attended Communist party congresses and top-secret military meetings.

Because Esther was an extraordinarily furry cat, no one ever noticed that she came equipped with a Minox. The furriness did create one problem, though -- a big one. Most of Esther's photographs show more fur than anything else (see example, right). Of the more than twenty thousand pictures she produced, only a handful show anything that a human being can recognize. Esther died in 1962. Had she lived and worked a mere three decades later, new image processing technology would have been available to turn her furry photos into useful strategic tools. For Esther the Cold War kitty, opportunity came too soon.



Joseph Stalin at a meeting. The photo was taken by Esther.