

PARTICIPATORY REPRESSION? REFLECTIONS ON POPULAR INVOLVEMENT WITH THE STASI

Gary Bruce

The works of the newest generation of English-speaking historians of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) tend to eschew organizational concepts such as totalitarianism, repression, and resistance, adopting instead a societal approach that explores ideas of ordinariness, stability, and compromise.¹ Although these works by no means paint a completely rosy picture of life in the GDR, state structures, the Wall, the Stasi, and other controlling aspects of the regime tend to give way to the stuff of everyday life — hobbies, friendships, family, vacations, and local cultural offerings.² As a case in point, in the past ten years, the only books on the Stasi's domestic role by a US academic and based on empirical evidence were written by Edward Peterson, a retired historian, and were widely regarded as fairly weak scholarship.³ Even works that deal with the frequently aggressive way that East Germans engaged with the regime have tended to be informed by the literature on *Resistenz* and *Eigen-Sinn* (self-assertion) rather than on resistance.⁴

The trend in scholarship in German is somewhat different. The 1990s were dominated by studies of *Herrschaft* (state power), including the party's mechanisms for maintaining control. Of all works on the GDR since the collapse of the regime — and it is worth noting that over 15,000 books, articles, and edited collections appeared between 1990 and 2009 — a full 20 to 30 percent dealt with political history, and within that grouping the Stasi formed a substantial subset. In the past decade, the number of works in German on the political history of the GDR has declined, whereas the number on its social and cultural history has increased, to the point that they are now roughly equal. Economic history of the GDR remains a distant competitor.⁵

1 Mary Fulbrook has suggested a dichotomy between the “Checkpoint Charlie” and the “Octopus Theory” approaches to the GDR. See Mary Fulbrook, “Reckoning with the Past: Heroes, Victims, and Villains in the History of the German Democratic Republic,” in *Rewriting the German Past: History and*

Identity in the New Germany, ed. Reinhard Alter, Peter Monteath (Atlantic Highlands, 1997), 175–96.

2 See the summary of the GDR panels at the 2010 German Studies Association conference: Heinrich Bortfeldt, “Die DDR — keine Fußnote der Geschichte,”

Deutschland Archiv 43 (2010): 1088–91.

3 Edward Peterson, *The Secret Police and the Revolution: The Fall of the German Democratic Republic* (Westport, 2002); Edward Peterson, *The Limits of Secret Police Power: The Magdeburger Stasi, 1953–1989* (New York, 2004).

4 Andrew Port, *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic* (Cambridge, 2007); Paul Steege, *Black Market, Cold War* (Cambridge, 2007); Jeanette Madarasz, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971–1989: A Precarious Stability* (New York, 2003); Jeanette Madarasz, *Working in East Germany: Normality in a Socialist Dictatorship, 1961–1979* (New York, 2006); Mark Fenemore, *Sex, Thugs and Rock 'n' Roll: Teenage Rebels in Cold-War East Germany* (New York, 2007); Alan MacDougall, *Youth Politics in East Germany: The Free German Youth Movement, 1946–1968* (New York, 2004); Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford, 2010); Patrick Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany at the Frontiers of Power* (Oxford, 2009); Esther von Richthofen, *Bringing Culture to the Masses: Control, Compromise, and Participation in the GDR* (New York, 2009).

5 Ralf Jessen, “Alles schon erforscht? Beobachtungen zur zeithistorischen DDR-Forschung der letzten 20 Jahre,” *Deutschland Archiv* 43 (2010): 1052–64, 1056–58.

The “societal” approach to the history of the GDR has produced a number of conceptual frameworks to replace totalitarianism, including “welfare dictatorship,” “consensual dictatorship,” and “participatory dictatorship.”⁶ These concepts have not been without their critics. Peter Grieder of the University of Hull has provided a spirited defense of totalitarianism, but it is in Germany where the criticism has been most pronounced. Klaus Schroeder has argued for more emphasis on the controlling aspects of the regime, while Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk has ridiculed the recent concepts for being oxymorons.⁷ Nevertheless, these new conceptual frameworks dominate the recent histories of the GDR in English.

What follows is an assessment of the extent to which concepts such as “participatory dictatorship” can accommodate popular involvement with the regime’s most important tool for societal control, the Stasi. Certainly, a vast number of East Germans worked for the Stasi. At the time of its collapse, it employed 91,015 full-time workers and 173,000 informants, which translates into about 1 in 50 East Germans between the ages of 18 and 80 who worked for the Stasi either formally or informally.⁸ In the course of the GDR’s history, roughly a quarter million East Germans had been full-time employees and nearly 600,000 had been informants.⁹ In order to explore this relationship at the grassroots, this essay focuses on two Stasi district offices (*Kreisdienststellen*): Gransee and Perleberg. District Gransee, one of fifteen district offices in Region (*Bezirk*) Potsdam, grew from a modest complement of seven operational officers in 1954 to seventeen in 1989. District Perleberg, located in what was Region Schwerin, was considerably larger than District Gransee, with 24 operational officers in 1989. Both districts are located in today’s *Bundesland* Brandenburg. Although they have received comparatively little attention in the literature, the district offices were enormously important to the regime, not least because they ran over 50 percent of all Stasi informants.¹⁰ Erich Mielke, Minister of State Security, made plain his views on the importance of the district offices: “The district offices are the decisive instrument for the security of our workers’ and farmers’ state.”¹¹

It is important to state at the outset that participation in the Stasi was not uniform; there were myriad ways for East Germans to engage with the secret police. Although scholars frequently cite the 91,000 full-time Stasi employees by the time of the regime’s collapse to indicate the enormity of the organization — in contrast to

6 On welfare dictatorship, see Konrad Jarausch, “Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship,” in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Jarausch (New York, 2000). Martin Sabrow has championed consensual dictatorship in Konrad Jarausch, Martin Sabrow, eds., *Weg in den Untergang: Der innere Zerfall der DDR* (Göttingen, 1999). Mary Fulbrook put forward the term “participatory dictatorship” in *The People’s State: East German Society from Honecker to Hitler* (New Haven, 2005).

7 Klaus Schroeder, *Der SED-Staat* (Munich, 1998); Peter Grieder, “In Defence of Totalitarianism Theory as a Tool of Historical Scholarship,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8 (Sept. 2007): 563–89; Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, *Endspiel: Die Revolution von 1989 in der DDR* (Munich, 2009), 463.

8 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, ed., *Im Visier der Geheimpolizei: Der kommunistische Überwachungs- und Repressionsapparat 1945–1989* (Leipzig, 2007), 12.

9 Mike Dennis, *The Stasi: Myth and Reality* (London, 2003), 90.

10 John Schmeidel, *Stasi: Shield and Sword of the Party* (New York, 2008), 17, 21.

11 As quoted in Martin Debes, *Durchdringen und Zersetzen: Die Bekämpfungen der Opposition in Ostthüringen durch das MfS im Jahre 1989* (Manebach, 1999), 12.

the Gestapo who employed a mere 7,000 in the prewar period for a population more than three times that of East Germany¹² — this number includes every single Stasi employee, from the operational officer who held sway over the life opportunities of East Germans, to the night watchman at a remote Stasi post in the countryside. District Perleberg is a case in point: Of the 53 full-time employees in 1989, 24 were directly involved with societal surveillance, while the rest functioned in a supporting role, primarily clerical or as building security. As much as the individuals in these latter positions provided the necessary infrastructure for widespread repression, and as much as they were frequently committed ideologues, they did not engage directly in repression.

At 173,000, the number of informants was almost twice that of the full-time Stasi officers. As a shorthand, the media frequently use the generic IM (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*) to denote a Stasi informant, but here, too, it is important to differentiate among informants. There were six types of Stasi informants by the 1980s, ranging from a lead informant who was placed in charge of other informants (*Führungs-IM*), to a low-level informant who did not work a specific case and was called on instead to report in general terms on society (*Gesellschaftlicher Mitarbeiter für Sicherheit* — GMS). Typically, the GMS was a functionary of the regime in some position of authority, a fact that reduced his effectiveness since knowledge of his support of the regime would have been widespread. “Informants for aiding conspiracy” (*Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter zur Sicherung der Konspiration und des Verbindungswesens* — IMK), who put their dwelling at the disposal of the Stasi so that an officer and informant could meet in private, represented a different informant category altogether and, at roughly one-fifth of the informant roster, a substantial one.¹³ Their role was crucial in the logistics of repression, but they were not informants in the true sense of the word; they did not inform on anyone. Although the documents do not allow for more precision about the categories of informants, we know that there were roughly 624 Stasi informants in District Perleberg in 1988, and about 414 in District Gransee.¹⁴ This translated into one informant for every 76 people between the ages of 18 and 65 in District Perleberg, and one informant for every 66 people in the same age category for District Gransee. If the overall trend in the Stasi held true in these districts, about 18 percent of the informants would have been IMKs and 19 percent GMS. The 30,000 IMKs and 33,300 GMS run by the Stasi, or roughly 40 percent of the informant net, should not be considered direct agents of repression in

12 Robert Gellately, “Denunciations in Twentieth-Century Germany,” *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996): 931–67, 933.

13 Jens Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern. Die Geschichte der Stasi* (Stuttgart, 2001), 113.

14 Gary Bruce, *The Firm: The Inside Story of the Stasi* (New York, 2010), 198.

the same way as the “classical” informant or the full-time operational officer.¹⁵

In the question of denunciation as a form of participation in a dictatorship, Karl-Heinz Reuband’s caution about denunciation in Nazi Germany is noteworthy: it was never a mass phenomenon.¹⁶ Put another way, the vast majority of people in Nazi Germany did not denounce anyone, which was true in the East German dictatorship as well. The extent, then, to which we can conclude that denunciation indicates regime support or lack thereof must be tempered by this fact. Nevertheless, largely as a result of Robert Gellately’s pathbreaking works on the Gestapo, which revealed that a not insignificant part of the German populace was willing to spontaneously denounce fellow Germans to the Gestapo, scholars have come to consider denunciation as a barometer for regime acceptance. It has become commonplace to compare the Nazi regime to the East German regime in order to demonstrate that spontaneous denunciation occurred with greater frequency — and therefore popular support was deeper — in Nazi Germany than in East Germany.¹⁷

The Stasi at first glance appears fundamentally different from the Gestapo. Whereas the Gestapo can be considered an arms-length participant in an essentially self-policing society, the Stasi was required to establish and constantly refine a network of amateur informants.¹⁸ This vast army of informers was ostensibly necessary due to the relatively few spontaneous denunciations from the common person, unlike in Nazi Germany.

15 Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 113.

16 Karl-Heinz Reuband, “Denunziation im Dritten Reich: Die Bedeutung von Systemunterstützung und Gelegenheitsstrukturen,” *Historical Social Research* 26 (2001): 219-34, 219.

17 Gellately, “Denunciations,” 932.

18 *Ibid.*, 965.

19 BStU-Potsdam, AOV 62/59, 25; March 20, 1957, Vermerk, BDVP Potsdam an VPKA Gransee.

20 BStU-Potsdam, AOV 8/59, 7; May 21, 1958 Bericht, gez. Singer, Hauptsachbearbeiter.

Recent research on the Stasi, however, requires us to adjust our image of an East German population that did not spontaneously denounce. In the years immediately following the founding of the Stasi in District Gransee, many East Germans did, in fact, spontaneously denounce to the Stasi, much like denouncers in the Third Reich had done. A vague tip from a police officer in 1957 about a horse-breeding society that he suspected to be a front for former Nazis caused the Stasi to launch a formal (and, in the end, unsuccessful) investigation.¹⁹ In another operation, a 70-year-old man informed the Stasi of his grave concerns that his cleaning lady was a Western spy. The Stasi took this random tip seriously enough to launch a year-long investigation, which ultimately revealed that the initial claim was unfounded. The denouncer was simply retaliating because his cleaning lady refused to pursue a physical relationship with him.²⁰ A party member denounced to the Stasi the physical education teacher in Zehdenick for allegedly

associating with former high-ranking Nazis. Two years after launching the investigation, the Stasi concluded that the denunciation originated in a personality clash between the two individuals: “Since surveillance of the person in question has not revealed any enemy activity and since the tip was provided to us in part for personal reasons, [case] Nr. 15/57 should be sent to the archives.”²¹ Although these cases derive from District Gransee, they were not out of line with broader developments in the Stasi. In 1955, 30 to 50 percent of all major Stasi operations against suspected regime opponents (the *Operative Vorgänge*) originated from anonymous tips, an important finding that has somehow been lost in the literature despite the fact that Jens Gieseke, a prolific historian of the Stasi, brought it to light in 2001.²² Perhaps most surprising about this statistic is that, following the massive uprising that swept through East Germany in June 1953, the Stasi undertook a systematic campaign to increase its informant net, resulting in twice the number of informants within two years of the uprising.²³ In other words, although the Stasi by 1955 had at its disposal an extremely large informant net, it still relied heavily on anonymous denunciation. Still, the extent to which this spontaneous denunciation indicated widespread regime support should not be exaggerated. As the above cases reveal, and as was common with denunciations in the Third Reich, much denunciation was based in personal vendettas.²⁴ Moreover, in the admittedly very few cases above, two of the denouncers, the police officer and the teacher who held membership in the SED, could be said to be part of the regime apparatus, and not necessarily “ordinary” Germans, the typical denouncers in Nazi Germany.

In slotting the Stasi into her broader concept of East Germany as a “participatory dictatorship,” Mary Fulbrook has written: “An astonishing number appear to have been willing to act as unofficial informers for the Stasi.”²⁵ Although Fulbrook rightly casts doubt on Stasi internal findings that roughly 90 percent of informants were recruited out of candidates’ belief in the cause, she still suggests that the overwhelming majority of Stasi informants did not have to be coerced.²⁶ Perhaps the greatest difficulty in this approach is that it is exceptionally difficult to judge the degree of willingness to become an informant. In support of her contention, Fulbrook has argued that East Germans could choose simply not to engage with the Stasi: “A common method of avoiding entering an agreement to inform was simply to break the demanded code of secrecy by telling someone else of the approach . . . on hearing which the Stasi would immediately drop

21 BStU-Potsdam, AOV 22/59, 54; Feb. 5, 1959, Schlussbericht, gez. Wallert and Meuschke.

22 Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 122.

23 Helmut Müller-Enbergs, *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit* (Berlin, 2001), 1:36.

24 Vandana Joshi, *Gender and Power in the Third Reich: Female Denouncers and the Gestapo 1933-1945* (New York, 2003), 108; Gellately, “Denunciations,” 945-48.

25 Fulbrook, *People's State*, 4.

26 *Ibid.*, 243.

the potential informant. Another was simply to refuse.”²⁷ Although it is true that refusal to become an informant did not have negative repercussions, East Germans at the time did not know this. As Joachim Gauck, the oppositional Rostock pastor, subsequently first Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Files, and the current German president, has said, to refuse the Stasi required “ein starkes ich” (a strong I).²⁸ Vaclav Havel’s concept of outward adaptation, rather than willing participation, seems more apt for describing the manner in which many informants engaged with the Stasi.

Beyond the issue of measuring degrees of willingness, the argument of informants as willing “participants” in the East German dictatorship does not fit comfortably with the evidence. The 1953 guideline on informants, only the second on informants ever issued by the Stasi, expressed deep concerns that heavy-handed recruitment was leading to a number of informants who “spoke out of both sides of their mouth.”²⁹ Following the dramatic increase in the size of the informant net in the post-uprising years, Erich Mielke issued revised informant guidelines that stated in no uncertain terms that coercing informants to work for the Stasi had “damaged” the organization.³⁰ In 1979, Mielke again reiterated, in what would be the last guidelines dealing with informants, that Stasi officers were to thoroughly research an informant candidate before an approach was made, to ensure that the officer would not have to resort to coercion.³¹ Stasi documents from districts Gransee and Perleberg are replete with incidents of coercive recruitment of informants: an informant in Wittenberge agreed to work for the Stasi to prevent the Stasi from exposing his past as a guard at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.³² A clearly distraught twelfth-grader was given little choice by the recruiting officers but to commit to Stasi work. He was so shaken by the recruitment that he immediately told his parents.³³ Another informant who had been less than enthusiastic in his reporting confronted his controlling officer and asked to be released. His Christianity, he claimed, prevented him from spying on people. The Stasi officer responded in a heavy-handed manner, asking the informant whether he “liked his teaching job.” The implication was not lost on the informant, who became “visibly nervous” and agreed to continue working for the Stasi.³⁴ Even though Stasi officers were well aware that a coerced informant was likely to be subpar, they nevertheless typically prepared for the recruitment by uncovering some compromising material about the candidate. This could be anything from a Nazi past to an innocuous conversation with a West German while at a rest stop on one of the transit routes between West Germany and West Berlin.³⁵

27 Fulbrook, *People's State*, 244-45.

28 Quoted in *Opfer und Täter der SED-Herrschaft: Lebenswege in einer Diktatur. XVI. Bautzen-Forum der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung* (Leipzig, 2005), 101.

29 BStU-ZA, 2.9.1953 Dienstweisung Nr. 30/53 über die Erweiterung des Informantennetzes und die Arbeit mit Hauptinformatoren.

30 Oct. 1, 1958, Richtlinie 1/58, reprinted in Müller-Enbergs, *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, 1:212-13.

31 Müller-Enbergs, *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, 1:57

32 BStU-Schwerin, AIM 275/56; May 31, 1956; Beurteilung des GI Schulz, gez Danneberg.

33 BStU-Potsdam, 687/94, 71; Aug. 28, 1988, Aktenvermerk zum IM-Vorlauf des Gen. Oltm. Besenbiel.

34 BStU-Schwerin, AIM 444/56; Jan. 7, 1956, Beurteilung des Kuschel.

35 Interview with Matthias Piekert (pseudonym), Stasi officer with District Perleberg, Wittenberge, May 23, 2006.

The Stasi's institutionalized obsession with the size of the informant net, the frequency of meetings, and the number of informant reports, rather than a focus on quality, led to this enormous pressure on Stasi officers to recruit ever more informants. The dossiers of Stasi officers contain elaborate spreadsheets itemizing their informants and their frequency of contact. In 1984, District Perleberg Stasi officers held 2,430 meetings with their informants. This number increased to 2,596 in 1985, and 2,787 in 1987, before tailing off to 2,168 in 1988. In 1984, 1985, and 1987, informants in the district authored more than 5,000 reports annually.³⁶ Not only is the revelation that Stasi officers in this innocuous, outlying district held roughly seven informant meetings per day illuminating, so too is the fact that the Stasi even *recorded* these numbers. For East Germany's secret police, it was all a numbers game. A larger informant roster, more meetings, and more reports were equated with increased national security. When considering Lothar Schrader for promotion to first lieutenant, and deputy director, of District Gransee, the Stasi leadership in District Neuruppin, where Schrader was employed, made it clear that his frequent meetings with informants factored heavily into its deliberations: "In his average number of meetings with informants, [Schrader] is top in the district."³⁷ Stasi officers earned promotion and monetary bonuses based on their operational activity, primarily informant recruitment and effective running thereof, and successful monitoring operations against regime opponents. It should surprise little that they would adopt whatever means necessary to find "participants" for their system.

Gender must also be considered in evaluating participation in the Stasi since, at 90 percent, males dominated both the informant net and the regular corps.³⁸ This stands in stark contrast to the Nazi regime, where women made up about half of the denouncers.³⁹ That there was a continuing gender bias in the Stasi is no secret. Erich Mielke made it clear that Stasi workers needed to be available around the clock, something that he did not consider realistic for women because of their maternal duties. As Jens Gieseke has so cuttingly summarized, Mielke was not going to let the security of the "Workers' and Farmers' State" depend on the opening hours of day-care centers.⁴⁰ This view of women's domestic roles was, of course, not particular to the Stasi. Even though women had made significant advances in their representation as doctors, judges, and in industry — to the point that by 1970 East Germany had the world's highest percentage of female participation in an industrialized workforce⁴¹ — they still were vastly underrepresented in leadership positions in the party and in the state.

36 BStU-Schwerin, 10376, 10377. Bericht über IM in der KD Perleberg.

37 BStU-Potsdam, K2002, 68. Lothar Schrader. 16.4.1947. July 1, 1979 Vorschlag zur Beförderung zum Oberleutnant, by Major Abraham.

38 Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 113.

39 Joshi, *Gender and Power*, 97.

40 Jens Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter der Staatssicherheit* (Berlin, 2000), 268-69.

41 Donna Harsch, "Society, the State, and Abortion in East Germany, 1950-1972," *American Historical Review* 102 (1997): 53-84, 83.

Overall, although only 1 in 5 adults held membership in the SED, roughly 50 percent of informants were recruited from within the party. Depending on the region, however, this could be a relatively low percentage. No informant net in any region had less than 47 percent party members, while some regions soared as high as 73 percent.⁴² This heavy recruitment from inside the party exasperated the Stasi leadership, who insisted that the party was off-limits for the simple reason that the informant's party affiliation would have been known to the public, making them ill-suited to uncovering popular sentiment.⁴³ Nevertheless, out of sloth or pressure from above to increase the roster, it was precisely in the party that the Stasi sought its informants. From this point of view, and notwithstanding the significant role that coercion played in non-party recruitments, it is perhaps not that surprising to find a certain degree of willingness to inform for the Stasi when almost half of all informants (and in some regions as high as three-quarters) had been members of the communist party prior to recruitment.

Although the informants, the IMs, have received the lion's share of attention from academics and journalists alike, there was another group of people who worked for the Stasi on an informal basis who were, in the recollections of certain Stasi officers, even more important for monitoring the population than the regular informants.⁴⁴ "Contact persons" (*Kontaktpersonen*) were a shadow army of informants. On a regular basis, Stasi officers received information from individuals who were not on the books as official informants, including factory managers, school principals, landlords, hospital directors, and even acquaintances of Stasi officers themselves. Given the fact that contact persons generally enjoyed some privileged position in society, and that they usually had an ongoing relationship with the Stasi, they cannot be considered an equivalent to the random, spontaneous Third Reich denouncer, but their conduct nevertheless had parallels. Contact persons did take the initiative of approaching the Stasi when they considered something to be amiss. In this regard, a contact person was a much more valuable informant than the GMS informant who reported in general terms on East German society. Just as recent research has demonstrated that for certain target groups in the Third Reich, like Catholics, the Gestapo was more proactive than originally thought, so too was the Stasi more reactive than early accounts suggest.⁴⁵ Former Stasi officers, in their highly illuminating two-volume defense of the Stasi, tangentially distinguish between informants and other denouncers when they write: "It is beyond

42 Müller-Enbergs, *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, 3:102.

43 BStU-Potsdam, AKG 240, Jan. 8, 1979, Kontrollbericht, 3.

44 Author interview with Reihnard Kuhlow (pseudonym), Stasi officer of District Perleberg, Wittenberge, May 22, 2006.

45 On the Gestapo as more proactive in certain circles, see Eric Johnson, *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews, and Ordinary Germans* (New York, 1999).

doubt. Every intelligence service depends primarily on information obtained by its informants and other ‘tip-givers.’”⁴⁶ Contact persons were the most important of these other “tip-givers.” By 1989, the use of contact persons as quasi-informants had become so ubiquitous that Erich Mielke was forced to take a stand: “Contact persons are not informants. . . . We know of cases, however, where their work differs from that of an informant only in so far as one is registered, the other not.”⁴⁷

At the district level too, this heavy dependence on contact persons annoyed the Stasi leadership,⁴⁸ but the reasons for it must have been clear. It was much easier for a Stasi officer to wait for tips from a school principal, for example, than to engage in the lengthy process of grooming an informant. The result of this continued reliance on contact persons was that by the waning years of the regime in District Perleberg, at least 40 percent of Stasi monitoring operations were launched based on tips from contact persons and mail monitoring — not from its roster of regular informants.⁴⁹ This point is worth stating explicitly: The more than 600 informants in District Perleberg accounted for only 60 percent of denunciations. Moreover, the percentage of operations resulting from non-informant sources was roughly the same as it had been in the 1950s. Although more research is required into the role of contact persons, these first findings suggest that contact persons were almost as important to the Stasi as regular informants throughout its history.

The trend of late in the historiography of East Germany toward the study of ordinary Germans’ engagement with the regime, rather than of major state actors, has, of course, good grounds. It is an inescapable fact that the East German dictatorship, like the Nazi one before it, could not have functioned if not for the ordinary Germans who served it. At the same time, the recent emphasis on “ordinary” Germans has meant that those “extraordinary” Germans who occupied positions of authority and who were in a position to determine the manner by which “participation” in the dictatorship occurred have been relatively understudied. Our understanding of GDR history could now well be enhanced by a focus on the few, rather than on the many. In District Perleberg, for example, there were roughly 600 informants, but only eighteen operational officers for a population of some 90,000. By virtue of the fact that those officers recruited and groomed every informant, their importance in establishing parameters of participation cannot be overstated.

46 Reinhard Grimmer, Werner Irmeler, Willi Opitz, and Wolfgang Schwanitz, eds., *Die Sicherheit: Zur Abwehrarbeit des MfS* (Berlin, 2002).

47 Müller-Enbergs, *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, 1:86.

48 BStU-Potsdam, A/S 9.60, vol. 2, 10; July 26, 1958, Bericht der Arbeitsgruppe für Anleitung und Kontrolle über den Einsatz in der BV Potsdam in der Zeit vom Juni 23 bis zum Juli 23, 1958, gez. Major Kairies.

49 BStU-Schwerin, KD Perleberg 10586; July 8, 1987, Bestandsaufnahme, gez. Hauptmann Hummel, Referat A/I, bestätigt von Ryll.

Let us consider the case of the last leader of District Gransee, Hans-Jürgen Töpfer. Töpfer took over from the retiring Siegfried Tamme in 1985 and was at the helm of District Gransee when the regime collapsed. Based in large part on the dedication he demonstrated to Communism as an adolescent, which included a leadership position in the Free German Youth from the age of 15 to 17, the Stasi recruited Töpfer into the Stasi at the age of 23. By that time, he had been a member of the Socialist Unity Party for two years.⁵⁰ Prior to his recruitment, the Stasi noted with approval that he liked to read “socialist newspapers” in his spare time, and that he had agreed to three years of military service.⁵¹ There can be little doubt that Töpfer and his spouse were committed ideologues. During his vetting process, Töpfer’s fiancée agreed to end all postal contact with her grandparents in West Germany so as to improve Töpfer’s chances of recruitment by the Stasi.⁵² Later on, concerned that he had hit a ceiling in his career because of his parents’ visits to relatives in West Germany, Töpfer asked his superiors to prevent them from obtaining permission to travel. A few months after the death of his wife’s grandmother, a frequent visitor to the West, Töpfer was made leader of District Gransee, which was no coincidence.⁵³ Töpfer was intensely dedicated to his career in the Stasi, so much so that the Stasi observed that he fell into depression when his coworkers did not undertake their tasks properly.⁵⁴ Töpfer was by all accounts not an East German who simply “participated” in the regime, but a committed ideologue who enthusiastically engaged with the state out of conviction and in order to advance the regime’s agenda.

He was not an exception. In District Gransee, the majority of the 35 employees, and the vast majority of the 17 operational officers, had been brought up in households where at least one of the parents was a member of the party. It is, again, worth emphasizing that only 20 percent of East German adults held membership in the party. Even in households with no parents in the party, the Stasi registered positive indications, like the fact that the parents did not watch Western television, or that they were “positively inclined” toward the GDR.⁵⁵ Töpfer and the rest of his Gransee officer corps were, and had always been, dedicated Communists.

As time went on, the Stasi increasingly turned to the children of Stasi officials to replenish their ranks. By 1989, 6 out of 35 Stasi employees in District Gransee were the children of Stasi officials, placing it in line with the Stasi overall where about 16 percent of all Stasi workers

50 BStU-Potsdam, K531, Hans-Jürgen Töpfer, Zusammengefasste Auskunft (undated), 16.

51 BStU-Potsdam, K531, Hans-Jürgen Töpfer, 20 Feb. 1967 Abschlussbericht from KD Rathenow, 31–32.

52 BStU-Potsdam, K531, Hans-Jürgen Töpfer, 82, Apr. 21, 1978, Beurteilung des Genossen Töpfer, gez. Verch.

53 BStU-Potsdam, K531, Hans-Jürgen Töpfer, 106. Aug. 12, 1985, Vorschlag zur Ernennung Töpfer zum Leiter der Kreisdienststelle Gransee mit Wirkung vom 1.11.1985; Nov. 18, 1980, Brief, KD Rathenow an VB Potsdam.

54 BStU-Potsdam, K531, Hans-Jürgen Töpfer, April 21, 1978, Beurteilung des Genossen Töpfer, gez. Verch, 83.

55 See BStU-Potsdam, K3806 Eberhard Berndt, 25.9.1951 and K 3251 Volker Ehmig, 06.01.1955.

were the children of Stasi officials.⁵⁶ If one considers familial ties to the Stasi, the statistics are eye-opening: Between 1968 and 1982, 47 percent of Stasi personnel had a relative in the secret police.⁵⁷ In District Gransee, this trend was even more pronounced, where 61 percent of employees had a relative in the Stasi, and of those, 26 percent had more than one relative in the organization. By way of illustration, one Perleberg officer, the son of a female Stasi worker, had two sons with the Stasi in nearby districts, and his niece and her husband were employed at the Stasi headquarters in East Berlin.⁵⁸ The Stasi was a male, Communist, family affair, and by no means a representative cross-section. These were the outliers, the ones whom one would expect to seek out opportunities to engage with the regime. They did not so much participate in the dictatorship as serve it.

Conclusion

Broad popular enthusiasm for the Nazi regime, and the sense of belonging the regime engendered, have been at the heart of recent works on the Third Reich.⁵⁹ Germans applied in droves for *Ahnenpässe* to prove their Aryan ancestry, they took part enthusiastically in Strength Through Joy programs, and they helped out their racial comrades with generous donations to the Nazi charitable winter relief campaigns (*Winterhilfswerk*). Ian Kershaw has suggested that they also supported the regime to the bitter end partly out of the sense of collectivity that involvement in Hitler's mad racial schemes brought on.⁶⁰ As Sebastian Haffner brilliantly observed during his 1939 exile in London, the Germans were not subjugated; they were "something else, something worse, they [were] 'comraded.'"⁶¹ This image of a mobilized population stands in stark contrast to the East German case, where, as the Stasi instructs, participation appears rather more like outward accommodation except for a privileged minority. No one would talk of East Germans being "comraded," unless it were tongue in cheek.

There is little question that the vast majority of East Germans had to participate in the system, especially after the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961,⁶² and that, in some areas, like select cultural and leisure activities, there was a certain communality of interest. In order to understand state-sponsored repression, however, a shift of emphasis is required, a shift toward those who did not *have* to participate, but *chose* to. "Contact persons" who, from their privileged positions, denounced fellow East Germans require much more study, as do

56 Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter*, 421.

57 *Ibid.*, 335.

58 BStU-Schwerin, Abt KuSch, 106, Joachim Abraham, unpaginated. The 61 percent is based on a sample of two-thirds of employees in District Gransee.

59 Götz Aly, *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (New York, 2007); Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA, 2008); Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918–1945* (New Haven, 2010).

60 Ian Kershaw, *The End: The Defiance and Destruction of Hitler's Germany, 1944–45* (New York, 2011).

61 As quoted in Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide*, 32.

62 Fulbrook, *People's State*, 292.

mid-level functionaries who ran the district offices of the Stasi and were responsible for the lion's share of surveillance. Their role in the "system" was crucial: They had regular meetings with the first secretary of the party in the region, they liaised with the local council, and they met regularly with party bosses in factories. They are closer to the idea of a participatory dictatorship than the run-of-the-mill informant, but they were hardly ordinary Germans.

East Germans engaged with the Stasi in different ways, and for different reasons. Some, like the roughly half of all informants who came from the party, participated out of conviction. Many others were coerced, cajoled, and blackmailed. Some became high-ranking informants; others begged for mercy and were dismissed. Some became full-time operational officers who held sway over the life opportunities of fellow East Germans, while others cleaned the Stasi's floors. Males participated in the Stasi; women, mostly, did not. As much as a more nuanced approach is required to understanding the Stasi than the conceptual frameworks currently forwarded, one that addresses differentiation in participation and that recognizes the elitist quality of the Stasi, there is one overriding factor that must guide any alternative concept, a factor that speaks to the *raison d'être* of the Stasi and to the limits of concepts such as consensual or participatory dictatorship: Unlike in Nazi Germany, at no point could the ruling party in East Germany have depended on the voluntary support of the population.⁶³

Gary Bruce is an associate professor of history at the University of Waterloo. His research interests cover East German history, surveillance, and opposition in twentieth-century Germany, as well as crimes of World War II perpetrators in Western Europe. Among his best-known publications is the concise study *The Firm: the Inside Story of the Stasi* (2010). Currently, he is working on a history of the Berlin Zoo from its founding in 1844 to the unification of the two Berlins in 1990.