

THE STASI AND EAST GERMAN SOCIETY: SOME REMARKS ON CURRENT RESEARCH

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The place of repression, persecution, and surveillance in our overall picture of East German society is still contentious. It was in the focus of big public debates, like the discussions about the federal memorial concept in 2007, which was designed to shape some basic concepts and topics of “official” memory policy, and of academic research as well.¹ These discussions presented contrasting images of a totalitarian rogue state and a safe and comfortable niche society that still form the core of public and academic debates about GDR society.

Part of the progress, at least in mainstream research, in the past twenty years, is the recognition that everyday life and social history are relevant as research fields for post-Stalinist times. At the same time, it has become obvious that such histories cannot be written “with the politics left out.” Not by chance did contradictory terms like “The idyllic world of dictatorship” or “welfare dictatorship” attempt to catch this connection.² Despite all the sharp controversy, this is true for the debate among German and French academics on East German society,³ as well as for the Anglo-American one — for instance, as represented in the H-German discussions on Andrew Port’s microhistorical study on Saalfeld or Mary Fulbrook’s phrase of the East German “People’s State,” debating the grade of “totalitarianity” versus “normality” of life in late communist societies.⁴

Behind these conflicting interpretations lies a complex of contradictory findings: 1) It is clear that East German society had a huge secret police apparatus, but did its size express a strength or rather a weakness of the system? 2) There was, likewise, a huge number of political prisoners and persecuted people. Nevertheless, in a more differentiated view, it becomes clear that the overall intensity of persecution decreased over time or at least changed significantly in character. 3) From the 1950s on, the intensity of active resistance and opposition declined, resulting in the formation of an internal opposition in the late 1970s that was limited in size and confined itself to a reform-oriented program. 4) We have to acknowledge that a broad majority of people did not fit into the dichotomous pattern of perpetrators and victims (or resistance fighters, respectively), but

1 See Martin Sabrow, ed., *Wohin treibt die DDR-Erinnerung? Dokumentation einer Debatte* (Göttingen, Bonn, 2007). For a general account on the topic, see Jens Gieseke, *The History of the Stasi* (New York, Oxford, 2014).

2 Stefan Wolle, *Die heile Welt der Diktatur* (Berlin, 1998); Konrad H. Jarausch, “Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship,” in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (New York, Oxford, 1999), 47–69.

3 For the French contributions, see Emmanuel Droit and Sandrine Kott, eds., *Die ostdeutsche Gesellschaft. Eine transnationale Perspektive* (Berlin, 2006); Sandrine Kott, *Le communisme au quotidien. Les entreprises d’État dans la société est-allemande, 1949–1989* (Paris, 2001).

4 Andrew Port, *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic* (Cambridge, 2007); Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, London, 2005), 297. For the discussion on H-German, visit <http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/other/ostalgie07.html>.

have to be defined as somehow “in between.” Even if we are cautious in interpreting retrospective accounts,⁵ there is no denying that this majority today tends to draw a surprisingly positive image of life under communist dictatorship and seems to claim that, at least in their personal lives, the Stasi played a much less significant role than is presented in public memory culture. 5) Finally, the East German system was stable over a long period, from the 1960s to the 1980s, but was subject to rapid disintegration and dissolution of all kinds of structures of domination under the pressure of a mass movement generated by the previously quiet population, which was united by three major objectives: to end SED rule, to open the border, and to eliminate Stasi surveillance.

In the following, two major fields of research that derive from such findings will be discussed. The first is the role and function of the State Security Service in relation to the broader population, and the second is the research on secret police informants, the *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (“unofficial collaborators”), which can be seen more or less as a development unique to Stasi research.

Omnipresence as a Research Problem – Outlines of an Image of State Socialist Society

The first issue to be addressed is the relationship between the Stasi and the “quiet” majority of East German society that belonged neither to the opposition scene nor to the layer of active supporters of the regime. The term “quiet majority” itself is highly problematic in that it suggests homogeneity and well-defined limits for the group that both dissolve immediately upon more detailed consideration, particularly with respect to its members’ relationship to the Stasi. Even the claim that there is such a “quiet majority” is part of a certain conceptualization that contradicts the thesis of total surveillance and atomization, because this thesis implies an evenly spread level of totalitarian pressure of repression of “the state” against “the society,” and, therefore, a dichotomous split between perpetrators and victims with nothing or nobody in between.

The term “quiet majority” heuristically picks up the public discussions and oral history narratives in which the Stasi or the question of principal resistance against the regime frequently played no major role. As Dorothee Wierling observed throughout her interviews,

5 For instance, the survey conducted by Mary Fulbrook in 2005 tends strongly to overrepresent former state officials and supporters of the SED regime by focusing on their preferred residential districts in East Berlin; see Mary Fulbrook, ed., *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961–1979: The ‘Normalisation of Rule’?* (New York, Oxford, 2009); for a critical review, see Thomas Lindenberger, “Normality, Utopia, Memory, and Beyond: Reassembling East German Society,” *German Historical Institute London Bulletin* 33, no. 1 (May 2011): 67–69; and Ralph Jessen and Jens Gieseke, “Die SED in der staatssozialistischen Gesellschaft,” in *Die Geschichte der SED. Eine Bestandsaufnahme*, ed. Jens Gieseke and Hermann Wentker (Berlin, 2011), 16–60.

In a first step, we should engage with a simple explanation for the silence about the Stasi in their life stories: the possibility that a considerable part of East Germans never felt touched or affected by the Stasi phenomenon and therefore kept silent about something that was not experienced personally. This explanation may particularly apply to the lower classes of East Germany, at least for the period in which the snitch system expanded most, that is, in the seventies.⁶

I will later come back to the substance of that argument, but, meanwhile, it opens the field to raise more questions: How and by whom was the Stasi acknowledged as a factor of personal life? What kinds of threats were perceived? How did the Stasi usually act toward the “average” East German? What was the threshold for a minimum of attention or for more intense operational activities, culminating in detention or strong pressure like the notorious measures of covert psychological terror (*Zersetzungsmaßnahmen*); and, finally and more generally, how political or apolitical was the existence within the quiet majority under the influence of Stasi presence?

The relevant data on the Stasi apparatus from the mid-1960s onwards show a continuous expansion in absolute numbers as well as differentiation by sectors of society. Although the basic units of the apparatus, particularly the local offices (*Kreisdienststellen*), grew much more slowly than the central ministry bureaucracy, the expansion is obvious. The average staff of the more than 200 local offices grew from 30 officers in 1972 to more than 40 in 1982 and, finally, to nearly 50 in 1989.⁷ Moreover, a considerable portion of the intermediate-level district administration (*Bezirksverwaltung*) staff was responsible for certain local companies or institutions. Thus, the Stasi got a broad basic structure in the 1970s and 1980s, but it was not evenly distributed. As Daniela Münkel recently showed for the local office of Halberstadt in the Magdeburg district, staff resources were concentrated on a number of specific priorities and problem areas:⁸

- As Halberstadt bordered West Germany (like about one-quarter of all GDR counties), a large proportion of officers concentrated on preventing escapes. This can be generalized insofar as even in nonborder local offices, the uncovering of escape plans and preparations and, from the mid-1970s onwards, the struggle to prevent people applying for exit

6 Dorothee Wierling, “Die Stasi als Erinnerung,” in *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft. Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR*, ed. Jens Gieseke (Göttingen, 2007), 187–208; translation J. G.

7 BStU, Central Archives, Ministry for State Security, Main Department for Cadres and Education, statistical staff reports.

8 Daniela Münkel, “Staatssicherheit in der Region. Die geheimen Berichte der MfS-Kreisdienststelle Halberstadt an die SED,” *Deutschland Archiv* 43, no. 1 (2010): 31–38.

visas remained the most demanding tasks for the Stasi. This was the most important field of direct persecution as well: from 1961 on, continuously, about 70 to 80 percent of all arrest cases involved people who had attempted to leave East Germany one way or another, while all other forms of oppositional behavior, like “*staatsfeindliche Hetze*” (subversive agitation), *Gruppenbildung* (building of groups), etc. (including espionage, by the way), only played a minor role.⁹

- A second priority was the monitoring of economic performance: a large portion of central and local reports dealt with the problems of economic plan fulfilment and respective obstacles, the supply situation in retail and industry, and the corresponding reaction among the population.
- A third priority was containment and control of all kinds of Western influence, so-called political-ideological diversion (or PID). It goes without saying that the fight against PID was a general duty of the Stasi, but step-by-step operational activities in this field concentrated on disciplining and monitoring the upper layers of society, i.e., nomenklatura cadres, like ministry staff or industrial managers in all sectors and particularly the members of the elites responsible for regime security in general, like SED party functionaries and officers of army and police forces.¹⁰

The scope of success in these three main sectors of activity varied extremely. The priority-setting that fueled the expansion of the Stasi showed a clear focus on the political security of the regime and ideological homogeneity within the state-socialist upper class, but these priorities were realized at the expense of other communist policy goals. The State Security Service’s intrusion into the economic field was dysfunctional in terms of economic efficiency, because it ended up acting in the same mixture of voluntaristic command style and “gray,” half-legal improvisation as all other branches of the plan economy — and, moreover, weakened technological innovation and creativity by intervening against engineers or management staff with private contacts to the West and in cases of ideological deviation or personal misconduct. Not by accident did state-owned enterprises try to block or evade such interventions, but they were not too successful.¹¹

As guards of the ideological homogeneity of the socialist “upper class,” the Stasi, moreover, contributed to negative selection, thereby preventing plurality and creativity. It is obvious that, in

9 See the Annual Reports of Main Department IX on *Ermittlungsverfahren*; BStU, Central Archives, MfS, Main Department IX.

10 For a more detailed account, see Gieseke, *The History of the Stasi*, Chapter 5.

11 Franz-Otto Gilles and Hans-Hermann Hertle, *Überwiegend negativ. Das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit in der Volkswirtschaft dargestellt am Beispiel der Struktur und Arbeitsweise der Objektdienststellen in den Chemiekombinaten des Bezirks Halle* (Berlin, 1994); Georg Wagner-Kyora, *Vom “nationalen” zum “sozialistischen” Selbst. Zur Erfahrungsgeschichte deutscher Chemiker und Ingenieure im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 2009).

the long run, such practices diminished integration within socialist society.

The Stasi and the Working Class

At the same time, in the lower layers of society, it is clear that there was compromise concerning the intensity and scope of penetration by the Stasi and all other institutions of repression, except in the case of managers, ministerial bureaucrats, functionaries, and security staff. One side of that compromise was harsh repression against all kinds of collective or overt political action. As Renate Hürtgen has shown, the number of strikes or even minor walkouts among workers, or other forms of political action like collective petitions, decreased under the pressure of continuous criminalization to nearly nil. The powerful traditions of the labor movement's collective articulation of interests, which had been lively in the early 1950s, became largely extinct during the 1970s and 1980s.¹²

Within this framework of repression, however, the East German working class developed a specific kind of agency and a clear sense of the scope and limits of criticism that it could articulate, particularly in the areas of wages, retail prices, supply of daily goods, and general questions of equality and egalitarianism.¹³ Not only petitions, but central and local Stasi reports (and those of other party and state institutions) as well, attest to these forms of criticism consistently over time, while the vast majority of individuals voicing such criticism feared no sanctions. Grumbling or even political jokes remained without consequences within this layer of state-socialist society. Such statements were judged “politically unclear” but not “hostile,” so those who uttered them were not prosecuted.¹⁴ And, by the way, the typical Stalinist allegation against workers in the 1950s — sabotage in case of production breakdowns — did not play any significant role in the later period.

As a first conclusion, we can determine that the Stasi was strongly present in East German society and was a vital requirement for regime security and the maintenance of ideological conformity, but it was, at best, useless for economic efficiency and social integration, if not strongly counterproductive. Moreover, in the post-Stalinist period, it became possible for individuals to lead lives relatively distanced from the regime and its instruments of repression as long as they learned to consciously or unconsciously accept their place and the limits of their agency. Therefore, despite the exceptional expansion of the Stasi from the late 1960s until 1982, the concepts of total penetration and

12 Renate Hürtgen, *Zwischen Disziplinierung und Partizipation: Vertrauensleute des FDGB im DDR-Betrieb* (Cologne et al., 2005).

13 Renate Hürtgen and Thomas Reichel, eds., *Der Schein der Stabilität — Betriebsalltag in der Ära Honecker* (Berlin, 2001).

14 For details, see Jens Gieseke, “Bewölkungsstimmungen in der geschlossenen Gesellschaft. MfS-Berichte an die DDR-Führung in den 1960er- und 1970er-Jahren,” *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, Online-Ausgabe 5, no. 2 (2008) <<http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Gieseke-2-2008>>.

repression are misleading. To put it in terms of the regime's policy in the Honecker era: the SED First Secretary commented on the Helsinki process in 1976 that "security comes first," and, of course, this was so,¹⁵ but Honecker's policy was actually prompted by a mixture of aims, a combination of securing the party's position of power *and* gaining legitimation among the population by means of social and worker-friendly measures, not to mention securing the legitimation and approval of the West — and, in particular, the West German government — as well. So, in fact, the basic feature of the Honecker era was not only the well-known strategy of "unity of social and economic policy" but the unity of a combination of social, economic, *and security* policy — a policy that failed, of course, in all three fields. Moreover, the strong presence of the attractive West in the minds of East Germans via electronic media and personal contacts made all SED policy an uphill fight. Repressive stabilization was an important feature, but not the only one.¹⁶

The findings presented here are, of course, largely provisional. They are based on a first wave of sectoral and regional studies that tried to go beyond counting and describing the overwhelming number of staff, funds, files, etc. These projects include the BStU research on Halberstadt and other important studies on Saalfeld by Andrew Port and on two villages in Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg by Jan Palmowski.¹⁷ Notable sectoral studies are Georg Wagner-Kyora's research on engineers from the Buna-Leuna chemical industry, which draws heavily on the microanalysis of the research and development divisions in these factories, and Dolores Augustine's work on scientists and engineers in East Germany.¹⁸ Such local and regional analyses can be particularly valuable, because they make it much easier for a researcher to track the complex interactions among several institutions and draw a detailed and differentiated image of everyday practices of rule and life and their change over time.¹⁹ In such research, it is important not to restrict one's analysis to the Stasi but to focus on the local society as a whole. By the way, the Stasi files can be useful sources to complement the usual sources like petitions, trade union reports, etc., for researching everyday life.

The Stasi Presence and Behavioral Patterns of "Ordinary" East Germans

Thomas Lindenberger described the general setting of East German society as a "dictatorship of limits." These limits included, first and

15 "Helsinki und wir." Interview des Neuen Deutschlands mit Erich Honecker, dem Ersten Sekretär des Zentralkomitees der SED," *Neues Deutschland*, Aug. 6, 1975, 3-4.

16 Jens Gieseke, "Die Einheit von Wirtschafts-, Sozial- und Sicherheitspolitik. Militarisierung und Überwachung als Probleme einer DDR-Sozialgeschichte der Ära Honecker," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 51, no. 11 (2003): 996-1021.

17 Port, *Conflict and Stability*; Jan Palmowski, *Inventing the Socialist Nation. Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945-90* (Cambridge, 2009).

18 Wagner-Kyora, *Vom "nationalen" zum "sozialistischen" Selbst*; Dolores L. Augustine, *Red Prometheus: Engineering and Dictatorship in East Germany, 1945-1990* (Cambridge, 2007).

19 Roger Engelmann, "Eine Regionalstudie zu Herrschaft und Alltag im Staatssozialismus. Methodische Fragen, Erkenntnisziele, Quellen," in *Staatsicherheit und Gesellschaft*, ed. Gieseke (Göttingen, 2007), 167-86.

foremost, the large concrete border, but a lot of restrictions in everyday life as well that citizens had to learn and know. These taboos, which were sometimes more, sometimes less, defined, framed the field of personal agency.²⁰ Aside from the mere existence of the real concrete wall and the threat of being killed if they attempted to flee, East Germans experienced open violence and repression from 1945 until the late 1950s that strongly influenced their behavior, particularly in the ranks of the older generations: the more than one hundred thousand prisoners in special internment camps, the several thousand victims of Soviet military tribunals, and other political prisoners.²¹ The period of harsh repression after the second SED party conference in July 1952, the suppression of the June uprising in 1953 or other local unrest (like 1951 in Saalfeld),²² the expropriations and collectivization of private property, and, finally, the building of the Berlin Wall itself were all major fields in which memories were taboo.²³ These experiences of powerlessness left their traces on the older generations, the more so as destalinization remained half-hearted, to say the least, so that a return to these methods still seemed possible, even though the Stasi was far from achieving total penetration in a town like Saalfeld and its major factories, such as the Maxhütte Unterwellenborn, in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁴

It goes without saying that these experiences were not the only ones from the early years, and, as taboos, they were not easily communicated to younger generations. Yet they continued to have hidden effects and were kept alive via Western electronic media and passed on within families. It would take the post-Wall generation, which was not traumatized as intensely, to overcome these experiences and develop its own attitude towards the regime in that respect.

The taboos — like the unquestionability of party rule, the absence of democracy, the travel restrictions, and the question of German unity on any basis other than the East German model — were established in the early 1960s. To maintain them was, first and foremost, the duty of the institutions of political socialization like parental homes, kindergartens and schools, the Free German Youth, vocational training and universities. In these spheres, the Stasi intervened only in severe cases.²⁵ Besides selective repression, what the “silent majority” experienced was an occasional encounter with the preventive security bureaucracy. Parts of the population felt the presence of the Stasi like a “scratchy undershirt” (as dissident Jens Reich noted

20 Thomas Lindenberger, “Die Diktatur der Grenzen. Zur Einleitung,” in *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur. Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR*, ed. idem (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna, 1999), 13–44.

21 See Bettina Greiner, *Verdrängter Terror. Geschichte und Wahrnehmung sowjetischer Speziallager in Deutschland* (Hamburg, 2010), 331–458.

22 See Port, *Conflict and Stability*.

23 Daniela Münkler, “Mauerbau und Staatssicherheit,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 61, no. 31 (2011): 34–39; idem, “Unruhe im eingeschlossenen Land. Ein interner Stasi-Bericht zur Lage in der DDR nach dem Mauerbau,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 59, no. 4 (2011): 579–608.

24 Port, *Conflict and Stability*.

25 Marc-Dietrich Ohse, *Jugend nach dem Mauerbau. Anpassung, Protest und Eigensinn, DDR 1961–1974* (Berlin, 2003); Dorothee Wierling, “Die Jugend als innerer Feind. Konflikte in der Erziehungsdiktatur der sechziger Jahre,” in *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, ed. Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka and Hartmut Zwahr (Stuttgart, 1994), 404–25; Emmanuel Droit, *La Stasi à l'école — Surveiller pour éduquer en RDA, 1950–1989* (Paris, 2009).

in 1988),²⁶ or tried to manage these encounters psychologically by daring to tell one joke or another afterwards. For others, the Stasi was, perhaps, a faraway phenomenon that had little to do with their personal life. Yet even in these times, the image of the Stasi changed but never disappeared. Nearly everyone remembered or at least had to reflect with caution on surveillance by means of mail censorship, bugs, and informants.

As Palmowski shows in his case study of the village of Dabel in the northern part of the GDR, all these images of the Stasi were, nevertheless, countered by a certain feeling that some space for agency and solidarity was left within smaller communities. In Dabel in the 1960s, the Stasi failed to identify the creators of some “hostile” graffiti for years, even though one example had even been painted on the wall of the local policeman’s house. The Stasi case officers were convinced that the village inhabitants knew the culprits, but they were unable to break the wall of silence. In the view of the villagers, the Stasi, with its dark limousines and leather coats, was perceived as an outside force (unlike, for example, local party members) that conducted its search of the village and left again (despite Palmowski retrospectively identifying 46 informants among the village population).²⁷

The Stasi myth produced in such a manner was transformed and dealt with by means of a certain discourse fuelled by a mixture of fear and hope for an act of self-assertion, such as mocking the alleged eavesdropping on the telephone line or speculating on perceived spies among colleagues. This “people’s own” Stasi experience (to vary the phrase by Lutz Niethammer) flowed into sarcastic double entendres and split levels of communication in whispered jokes and rumors, and into circumlocutions for the agency like “the company,” “Konsum,” or “VEB Horch und Guck [Listen and Look].”

In the light of all this, Fulbrook’s claim seems debatable that “it is important [also] to notice just how many people never had occasion to hit against these boundaries [of the repressive system], and genuinely felt that they were able to lead ‘perfectly normal lives.’”²⁸ First, it is necessary to acknowledge that these boundaries did, indeed, exist. Second, citizens had to at least unconsciously know of the existence of these boundaries to keep from hitting against them. Stasi mood reports from the 1970s — a time recognized as the most stable and quiet period in GDR history — show clearly how present such “un-normalities” as the travel ban or the absence of democratic elections were.²⁹ The phrase “perfectly normal lives,” in this context, describes

26 Jens Reich, “Sicherheit und Feigheit — der Käfer im Brennglas,” in *Staatspartei und Staatssicherheit. Zum Verhältnis von SED und MfS*, ed. Walter Süß and Siegfried Suckut (Berlin, 1997), 25–37, first published in 1989 under the pseudonym Thomas Asperger in *Lettre international*.

27 Palmowski, *Inventing the Socialist Nation*, 284.

28 Fulbrook, *People’s State*, 297.

29 For details, see Gieseke, “Bevölkerungsstimmungen.”

a very old tradition of German political culture, which can be called *Untertänigkeit* (or “submissiveness”), and which obviously was perpetuated by the continuity of dictatorial rule in East Germany across the century.³⁰ This mentality was particularly present in the middle layers of GDR society, which were confronted with constellations of entrapment most frequently, like requests for official or unofficial reporting on colleagues to secure their own career position or keep doors open for the education of their children. After 1990, this *Untertänigkeit* mentality was turned into the metaphor of collective disease by Hans-Joachim Maaz and Joachim Gauck — maintaining the traditions of Critical Theory’s notion of “authoritarian character.”³¹ In terms of the history of society, it may be more adequate to read it as a continuity of older German traditions of political culture under conditions of a predemocratic (or, less teleologically, nondemocratic) constitution of society.³²

Given all this, it seems justifiable to doubt whether a majority of former GDR inhabitants would, in levelheaded self-inquiry, ascertain that they never felt the hidden presence of state authority or took it into account in their behavior. Quite the contrary: their very efforts to live “perfectly normal,” inconspicuous lives can be taken as confirmation of covert political pressure. Consequently, Wierling’s abovementioned observation can be read more as a defensive response to the “black and white” Stasi images of recent hegemonic memory culture. After all, practically all GDR inhabitants had a story to tell about their initial brush with the surveillance apparatus, even if it may not have been the most decisive experience in their everyday lives.

Towards a Sociology of Informants

When we accept these more complex descriptions of Stasi presence, of repression and surveillance within East German society, we have to reexamine the canonical images of the Stasi apparatus itself, particularly concerning the major “link” between this surveillance apparatus and society: the informants.

While the classification of the full-time staff of the Stasi apparatus as part of the security elites is unproblematic, the informants present more difficulties. The strong focus on informants in post-communist memory culture was not based on their systematic position or juridical seriousness (unlike in the case of SED functionaries or the border guards killing people on a regular basis at the Berlin Wall),³³ but on their social proximity. In a society shaped by the division

30 See Dietrich Staritz, “Untertänigkeit — Heritage and Tradition,” in *Studies in GDR Culture and Society* 6 (London, New York, 1986), 37–48. Stefan Wolle noticed an “apparent concord between authorities and subjects,” which could neither be “totally denied” nor explained “by the ever present threat of violence alone.” Stefan Wolle, “Alltag und Diktatur,” in *Lexikon Opposition und Widerstand in der SED-Diktatur*, ed. Hans-Joachim Veen et al. (Berlin, Munich, 2000), 42.

31 Joachim Gauck, “Der sozialistische Gang,” *Der Spiegel*, no. 25 (2006): 38–39; Hans-Joachim Maaz, *Der Gefühlsstau. Ein Psychogramm der DDR* (Berlin, 1990).

32 See Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft in der DDR. Zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR, 1945–1989* (Frankfurt/Main, 1992).

33 Transitional justice was mainly focused on these cases: Klaus Marxen and Gerhard Werle, eds., *Strafjustiz und DDR-Unrecht — Dokumentation*, 10 vols. (Berlin, 2000–2009).

between “official” and “private” life, they represented the regime’s strategies for intruding into the private sphere. It is no coincidence that the most heatedly debated cases were those of representatives of intermediate positions between the party-state and society who enjoyed a certain authority (like clergymen or half-dissident writers like Christa Wolf or Heiner Müller).

The strong public interest in informants results from the largely unilateral decision to open the Stasi files. Academic research, therefore, is strongly influenced by the concentration on (more or less) prominent individual cases, and by the evaluation and assistance in civil service vetting processes, the so-called lustration. Evaluations of these informant files show that research and political statements were directly linked. Doubts about the reliability of Stasi records in these cases may not only be subject to scholarly considerations, but may challenge the authority of the Stasi Records authority itself in many respects.

Moreover, researchers work under strong pressure to deliver clear criteria and definitions in their role as attestors of the authenticity and credibility of the files. This mode of “public history,” thus, preshaped the concepts of research. Categories of analysis and perception follow the — ostensibly clear-cut — secret police terms and thought systems: attention is focused, for the most part, exclusively on formally recruited IM, while all other forms of cooperation with the repressive apparatus (official contacts, spontaneous denunciations, etc.) are hardly recognized. Even the usage of the term IM is a remarkable outcome of this discourse. It changed from an internal bureaucratic euphemism of the secret police, which was designed to keep Stasi language clean and enhance the informants’ imagined position towards their case officers, to a synonym for the communist evil in post-communist language. In this discourse, it is taken for granted that the files are reliable, while retrospective testimony by accused people is put under suspicion of serving concealment as a matter of course.³⁴ These effects lead to a “reification” of Stasi files and their contents, followed by the involuntary adoption of vocabulary, thought patterns, and case narratives from the texts of the police bureaucracy.³⁵ It culminates in the widespread perception that the recruitment of a person as an informant is the one and only key to all other dimensions of his or her biography.

To overcome this kind of “Stasi positivism,” it may be helpful to recollect the conditions under which these records were produced. For

34 For example, Jochen Staadt, “Persilschein vom Führungsoffizier. Lügen die Akten von damals oder schwindeln ihre Verfasser heute?,” *Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat*, no. 20 (2006): 142–61.

35 See Ralph Jessen, “Diktatorische Herrschaft als kommunikative Praxis. Überlegungen zum Zusammenhang von ‘Bürokratie!’ und Sprachnormierung in der DDR-Geschichte,” in *Akten. Eingaben. Schaufenster. Die DDR und ihre Texte. Erkundungen zu Herrschaft und Alltag*, ed. Alf Lüdtke and Peter Becker (Berlin, 1997), 58–75.

instance, the pressure to appear as successful and fulfil recruitment plans promoted the tendency among Stasi officers to polish their assets, in terms of the number of meetings or the quality of the delivered information. Consequently, there are distortions in statements or entries concerning the personality of informants. For example, “political conviction” was a reputable basis for recruitment, which led to an extremely high percentage of such entries in the forms. On the other hand, fear and pressure were regarded as a problematic basis for recruitment. Generally, such kinds of ideological bias are obvious. The file language poured the complexity of informant business into a rigid system of pre- and post-1989 political and bureaucratic categories.

Whereas this tunnel vision has been widened a bit by a psychoanalytical approach and some academic or journalistic case studies,³⁶ we are far from a sociological and sociohistorical analysis of the informants within state socialist society. The findings and methodological lessons from social and cultural denunciation history, which was fueled by a wave of research on Stalinism and National Socialism, have not been adequately used for research on the Stasi, because such approaches would question the clear-cut images of IM and would make it necessary to draw a more differentiated and complicated image of informants and their motives.³⁷ Even the cases debated in public hint at the broad range of different types of cooperation. One person complied reluctantly and full of fear, the second did not know anything but scrupulous performance of his duties, the third was keen to secure his career, the fourth wanted to contribute to “dialogue” between state and society. One or another individual perhaps tried to track personal interests and, finally, one or another perhaps was driven by staunch communist ideals.

As the turnover rates and the analysis of individual cases show, in the 1950s a large twilight area of more or less forced recruitments — which proved to be of little value for the Stasi in terms of information gathering and influence — lay behind the impressive numbers. Presumably, information from party officials or spontaneous denunciation were much more important for persecution than informants in these years. Moreover, the analysis of this period, in particular, clearly reveals the strongly disciplining side effects of recruitment attempts on the general atmosphere within society. Thus, the practices of informant recruitment can be read in themselves as a particularly intense kind of reproduction of *Untertänigkeit*. This is true of

36 Ingrid Kerz-Rühling and Tomas Plänklers, *Verräter oder Verführte. Eine psychoanalytische Untersuchung Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter der Stasi* (Berlin, 2004); “Stasi auf dem Schulhof,” TV documentary, German television, ARD/Februarfilm, 2012.

37 See, for example, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, eds., *Accusatory Practices: Denunciations in Modern European History 1789–1989* (Chicago, London, 1997).

successful cases of recruitment, a process whose sociopsychological intensity can be regarded as on the same level as status passages of socialist “personality molding” like the military service. (Not by accident was the military service one of the most common settings for recruiting informants.) Yet the experience of a recruitment attempt reinforced the Stasi’s presence even if one managed to decline. To put it in a nutshell: a well-balanced approach to informants may benefit from taking into consideration the results of historical denunciation research and from shifting the focus to the *Lebenswelt* of formal and informal informants.

From a sociological perspective, a second point may be important. Even if Stasi guidelines, which were designed to penetrate primarily milieus that were distanced or hostile to the system, demanded that informants be recruited from all layers of society, statistics show that the actual distribution was anything but even. Contrary to the revelations from the opposition and church milieus, the majority of Stasi informants were SED party members, with a strong emphasis on nomenklatura cadres and army and police staff or those otherwise concerned with security questions.

This has been well known since the late 1990s, but it challenges our understanding of Stasi informants: First, it stresses the importance of the Stasi function of securing ideological conformity and loyalty within the upper strata of socialist society and enforcing the respective codes of conduct. Second, this distribution shows that recruitment as an informant was, in fact, connected in the majority of cases with other forms of collaboration and participation within the dictatorial system, like other more visible volunteer positions in border control, the People’s Police, combat groups, etc. This link is interesting with respect to our images of informant activities as expressions of “indecent.” Obviously, in some layers and sectors of East German society, it was part of a kind of “normality” to be a Stasi informant, just as it was “normal” to be responsible for the “house book” in your tenement block (in which visitors had to be noted) or to become a party member or a FDJ secretary for cultural activities, to attend the annual May Day demonstrations, etc. In a society in which citizens had to make concessions to political demands right from the cradle, it perhaps appeared much less “indecent” to follow the call of the Stasi. It must remain open to further research to determine how powerfully contemporaries from different milieus perceived the special moral implications of informant commitments and how they dealt with the situation.

It is obvious that these and other topics are tricky to research due to the strong impact of the Stasi files — an overwhelming amount of material on our images of Stasi activities — and the nearly total lack of alternative sources. But one should take into consideration that the chance to dive into this dimension of dictatorial rule should no longer be ignored, even though the records ought to be read against the grain and well-established certainties ought to be questioned.

The Shaping of Prerevolutionary Consciousness in the 1980s

It is not possible to discuss here in adequate detail the developments which in the 1980s, or, to be more precise, from the mid-1970s on,³⁸ led to the breakdown of the repressive system in 1989. But with respect to the trends described above, it is noteworthy that some spheres had evolved over the years wherein people were able to present a different tone and attitude. Once GDR inhabitants decided to drop higher expectations for their career and advancement, they gained a certain inner freedom, with the SED and the Stasi increasingly accepting or even condoning such patterns of nonconformity. As a result, while the Stasi tried with ever more effort to monitor all aspects of life, at the same time it lost its vigor in pursuing some kinds of deviation. From such a perspective, the exorbitant expansion of the apparatus and its opportunities can be reflected not as an expression of, but as a misleading surrogate action for, the declining totalitarian claims of the era of mobilization of communist rule.

Obviously, the political culture of *Untertänigkeit* became a framework too tight for larger parts of the population, particularly because the SED was no longer able to fulfil the promises of modest prosperity and welfare, nor the demand for a satisfying life. Confronted with the omnipresent images of Western values and standards of living, broad layers of East Germans turned this unease into a pivotal feeling of futility and a loss of life prospects for themselves and their descendants.

In the autumn of 1989, it became apparent that the Stasi had not been forgotten in these times, despite the successive exhaustion of ideological pressure, when the dissolution of the Stasi apparatus turned out to be one of the major issues of public unrest. It is not quite clear how people perceived the Stasi in the moment of revolt: Was their suffering so strong that the threat of a repressive “Chinese solution” did not impress the demonstrators, or was there a hidden consciousness or even a vague hope that the ruling elites and security

38 See Roger Engelmann, “Funktionswandel der Staatssicherheit,” in *Repression und Wohlstandsversprechen. Zur Stabilisierung von Parteiherrschaft in der DDR und der ČSSR*, ed. Peter Skyba and Christoph Boyer (Dresden, 1999), 89–97, and the other contributions in this volume.

39 Cf. Stephen Kotkin, *The Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment* (New York, 2009).

forces of the “uncivil society” had lost their will to defend their position by means of violence, as we learned in hindsight?³⁹ Perhaps most of the demonstrators in the early days of October 1989 had no precise idea about this and were driven by a willingness to take the risk necessary to achieve revolutionary change.

As these more or less provisional remarks on the state of research on the Stasi’s role within East German Society may have shown, finding the balance between overestimating and ignoring the role and function of the State Security Service is like walking a tightrope. The communist system in East Germany could not — and did not want to — exist without the Stasi, but neither was the Stasi omnipotent and omnipresent, even though the SED and the secret apparatus did a lot to spread that image. It was strong in guaranteeing the physical security of the system against all kinds of internal or external threats, thereby shaping social life in East Germany to a considerable extent. But, in the long run, it was not able to maintain a basis for its own existence — in terms of economic efficiency and the requirements of complex, modern societies. In these fields, strength turned into weakness, and the extensive expansion proved to be ballast.

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