

## BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY: THE STASI LEGACY IN GERMAN HISTORY

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Almost everyone who dealt with the GDR has a Stasi story. My own version involves Werner and Ingrid Deich, who were personal friends at the University of Missouri. He was a colleague in Early Modern History, while she was pursuing a PhD in sociology, analyzing the nuclear research programs of the FRG. When he was refused tenure, she was hired at the branch campus in Rolla. In 1979, Werner burst into her classroom, she dismissed her students, both rushed to their house, dumped documents into the trash and drove off, sending a telegram from Mexico City stating that a family emergency had called them away. A few years later, one of her former professors encountered her at an international sociology conference in Sweden where she was representing the University of Leipzig. It turned out that both had worked for Markus Wolf but were forced to flee when Werner Stiller defected to the West. The first to be fired after reunification, they lived in a modest apartment and tried to start a consulting business. They had been idealistic members of the student movement but were shocked by the reality of socialism in the GDR.<sup>1</sup>

In popular perception, the Stasi has become the new German ogre, competing with the SS to be *the* representation of absolute evil. Stimulated by Le Carré's intriguing spy novels, the Anglo-American public has been particularly interested in the exploits of its foreign espionage section, which was masterminded by the elusive and gentlemanly Markus Wolf.<sup>2</sup> In Germany, the shocking media revelations of collaboration by prominent figures like Lothar de Maizière, Manfred Stolpe, and Gregor Gysi have illustrated that the Ministry of State Security was well-nigh all-powerful in the GDR. Moreover, the public has been entertained by disclosures of spycraft like the infamous assembly of smell samples used to identify opponents of the regime. Finally, visitors to some of the Stasi prisons like Hohenschönhausen have been able to view the sites of torture and listen to stories of suffering by victims.<sup>3</sup> Taken together, these revelations have endowed the Stasi with an aura of larger-than-life mystery that is fascinating and repellant at the same time.

1 Ingrid Deich, *Zwischen Dallas und New York. Wie ich die USA erlebte* (Leipzig, 1986); and Werner Stiller, *Beyond the Wall: Memoirs of an East and West German Spy* (Washington, 1992).

2 John Le Carré, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (New York, 1963), is the classic text of this genre. See Markus Wolf, *Man Without a Face: The Autobiography of Communism's Greatest Spymaster* (New York, 1997).

3 For the prison memorial, see [http://en.stiftung-hsh.de/document.php?nav\\_id=CAT\\_233&subcat\\_id=CAT\\_253&recentcat=CAT\\_233&back=1&special=0](http://en.stiftung-hsh.de/document.php?nav_id=CAT_233&subcat_id=CAT_253&recentcat=CAT_233&back=1&special=0). See also Rainer Eckert, *Antitotalitärer Widerstand und kommunistische Repression* (Leipzig, 2006).

The interpretational impact of such publicity has been the conflation of the SED regime with its state security service. In a prize-winning 2003 book tellingly called *Stasiland*, Australian author Anna Funder published a dozen stories to illustrate “the vicious war [the GDR] waged on its own citizens” by means of its secret service. On the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Wall, she emphasized the repressive nature of the communist dictatorship in the *London Times* to counter the Left’s claim that the GDR was a “benign leftist social-welfare experiment.”<sup>4</sup> Academically speaking, this perspective has led to the revival of totalitarianism theory, which emphasizes the interplay of repression and resistance at the expense of daily life, a view which has been championed by the Hannah Arendt Institute in Dresden. Unfortunately, the neo-totalitarian approach is a considerable oversimplification as it ignores the element of voluntary compliance essential to the functioning of a “participatory dictatorship.”<sup>5</sup>

Two decades after the “peaceful revolution,” therefore, the challenge for historians is to demythologize the Stasi in order to discern its actual role in the GDR and abroad. There is no doubt of its “great importance,” since popular circumlocutions such as “the firm” or “listen and see” indicate a fearful reluctance to address the secret service by its real name.<sup>6</sup> The endeavor of discerning the actual role of the MfS needs to free itself from the dialectic of exaggeration by its former victims and belittling by its erstwhile members and strive instead to determine exactly what the Stasi did or did not do. In order to suggest ways to provide a more realistic picture of Stasi activities, the following remarks will briefly describe aspects of the organization’s mysterious reputation at the time, discuss the problems of de-Stasification, and comment upon some of the aftereffects of this process. Only such an effort to separate reality from myth will enable us to come to terms with what Jens Reich called “a scratchy undershirt” of the GDR.<sup>7</sup>

### The Stasi Mystery

Paradoxically, the secret service’s existence was quite well known in the GDR since the Stasi touted itself as the “sword and shield” of the SED. As a fighting arm of the regime, it took pride in its toughness, yet at the same time it subordinated itself to the political dictates of the communist party. Staffed by ruthless cadres and steeled in the street-fighting of the Weimar Republic and the International Brigades in Spain, it possessed a Civil War mentality; that is, it saw

4 Anna Funder, *Stasiland* (London, 2003); idem, “Why Germany Can’t Get Over the Wall,” *Times* (London), November 3, 2009.

5 For a totalitarian approach, see Klaus Schroeder, *Der SED-Staat. Partei, Staat und Gesellschaft 1949-1990* (Munich, 1998). For a more nuanced understanding, see Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, 2005).

6 Jens Gieseke, *Der Mielke Konzern. Die Geschichte der Stasi 1945-1990* (Munich, 2006), 18ff.

7 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.

the world in red and white terms and was ready to use physical force. Since it was established in 1950 by the Stalinist KGB, it also affected a romanticized Chekist ethos and worked in the tradition of the Bolshevik struggle against the counter-revolution. In the Cold War, the MfS therefore tackled the double task of defending the socialist GDR against outside subversion from the West and securing the power of the SED dictatorship within. After some early personnel upheavals, the Stasi stabilized under the tough MfS minister Erich Mielke, who expanded his ministry into a state within the state.<sup>8</sup>

Domestically, the Stasi ruled by means of fear derived from the secrecy that cloaked its operations. Some people would whisper about men in leather coats shadowing known dissidents while others talked of dark limousines pulling up in the early morning hours, hustling neighbors away, never to return. Its places of operation and detention exuded a dangerous aura, making pedestrians cross to the other side of the street. Rumors were rife since shaken victims fortunate enough to reemerge from interrogation were sworn to secrecy. This deliberate lack of precise information inspired an image of ubiquity, as one could never be sure who would report an unguarded remark at a bar or on an overcrowded train. Since there were few attorneys and prosecution rested on vague laws like “subversive agitation” (*Boykotthetze*), defending oneself against such accusations was extremely difficult. The growth of the number of formal employees and informal informants made the Stasi seem ever-present and intimidating far beyond its actual capacities.<sup>9</sup>

Its reputation abroad also lived from the same mixture of mystery and partial knowledge, which was amplified by spy fiction. During the 1950s, there were spectacular cases of kidnapping from West Berlin or of executing Stasi defectors in the West. Later on, revelations of Eastern spies penetrating the highest echelons of the chancellor’s office (the Guillaume Affair) and attaining the post of the FRG’s NATO liaison (Topaz) fired the public imagination. For a long time, the chief of foreign operations (HV A) Markus Wolf was known as “the man without a face” because his identity remained hidden until Stiller’s defection.<sup>10</sup> Even on a more mundane academic level, every visit to an East German archive was complicated by the question of which fellow researchers could be trusted and which ones might be leaking information to the Stasi. When I invited GDR colleagues such as Heinz Vosske, the director of the central party archive, for a lecture, I had to accept the fact that another person who worked for the MfS would be coming along.

8 Jens Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter der Staatssicherheit: Personalstruktur und Lebenswelt 1950–1989/90* (Berlin, 2000).

9 David Childs and Richard Popplewell, *The Stasi: The East German Intelligence and Security Service* (New York, 1996), 33ff.

10 Mike Dennis, *The Stasi: Myth and Reality* (Harlow, 2003), 177f.

Nonetheless, the fear of the Stasi gradually subsided in the 1980s, undercutting its effectiveness in preventing domestic unrest. One reason was its fundamental misunderstanding of system-immanent dissenters like Havemann, Biermann, and Bahro as agents of foreign subversion instead of as idealists trying to democratize socialism.<sup>11</sup> Another cause was the agency's gradual shift away from physical violence to more subtle techniques like psychological intimidation in the form of isolation, disinformation, and so on. This change of methods gave potential victims more room to maneuver: Many people refused to cooperate by rejecting secrecy and telling others about Stasi approaches (*Dekonspiration*); others managed to resist by becoming *Aussteiger*, opting out of the reward system and no longer looking for promotion, Western travel, cars, or the like. Even though the Stasi managed to penetrate the opposition to a considerable degree, a committed minority nonetheless dared to throw off their *Stasiangst* and challenge the system. Not even efforts to modernize spy technology could counter this gradual emancipation from Stasi control.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, the fiasco of 1989/90 was a product of demystification due to both bureaucratization and ideological confusion. Ironically, the endless reports generated by the Stasi's perfection of surveillance ultimately created a credibility gap when SED leaders refused to believe that the population was becoming more restive. Moreover, the professionalization of the service through training at the Stasi academy in Golm resulted in a routinization that made its measures more predictable. At the same time, Stasi involvement in the commercial-coordination (Koko) deals of Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski and in the staffing of the privileged Wandlitz enclave added a whiff of corruption that undermined the fighting spirit.<sup>13</sup> More important, however, was the loss of a clear-cut image of the enemy. Gorbachev's reform course in the Soviet Union made Russia more liberal than the GDR, undercutting the connection to the KGB that hardliners had previously relied upon. Krenz's dialogue policy as well as Modrow's negotiations at the Round Table recognized the opposition groups as legitimate partners. When these changes demystified the Stasi, reducing its capacity to instill fear, its power evaporated.<sup>14</sup>

### The Process of De-Stasification

Ironically, the Stasi's desperate effort to guard its own secrets from a resentful public eventually hastened its downfall. The growing chants

11 Ehrhard Neubert, *Unsere Revolution. Die Geschichte der Jahre 1989/90* (Munich, 2008); and Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, *Endspiel. Die Revolution von 1989 in der DDR* (Munich, 2009).

12 Kristie Macrakis, *Seduced by Secrets: Inside the Stasi Spy-Tech World* (Cambridge, 2008).

13 Walter Süß, *Staatssicherheit am Ende. Warum es den Mächtigen nicht gelang, 1989 eine Revolution zu verhindern* (Berlin, 1999); and Matthias Judt, "Häftlinge für Bananen? Der Freikauf politischer Gefangener aus der DDR und das 'Honecker-Konto,'" *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 94 (2007): 417–39.

14 Konrad H. Jarausch, *Die unverhoffte Einheit* (Frankfurt/Main, 1995). This dimension is underestimated in most accounts.

“make the Stasi do real work” (*Stasi in die Produktion*) during the fall of 1989 demonstrated the population’s widespread anger over secret service observation and manipulation. Against this backdrop, the shredding and burning of the Stasi files prompted concerned citizens’ committees in early December 1989 to occupy some of the regional headquarters to preserve the records of repression. Modrow’s misguided effort to salvage the core of the secret service by shrinking its size and renaming it the Office of National Security (Amt für Nationale Sicherheit, AfNS) only increased resentment, inspiring angry citizens to storm the Berlin headquarters in the Normannenstrasse in mid-January. His final attempt to split the service into independent foreign espionage and domestic information branches also misfired due to the suspicion of former victims who insisted on its complete dissolution.<sup>15</sup> Due to this inept self-defense, the abolition of the secret service became a central demand of the peaceful revolution.

One of the most controversial issues during reunification was the question of what to do with the written remains of the Ministry of State Security. While the Modrow cabinet authorized the cleansing of personal CVs, the Round Table permitted the destruction of all computer tapes and foreign espionage records out of fear of Western misuse and retaliation against perpetrators. In order to have some proof of persecution, the majority of the civic movement nonetheless insisted that the 120-kilometers of files be preserved for the sake of “political, historical, judicial and personal *Aufarbeitung*.” The CDU/FDP government was reluctant to comply since the Stasi records threatened to implicate many West German politicians by disclosing salacious details of their lives. In spite of the FRG’s data-protection mania, a hunger-strike by dissidents in the summer of 1990 succeeded in making the preservation of the records part of the unification treaty. Over the resistance of former Stasi members and Western skeptics, the Bundestag passed a Stasi records law a year later that secured public access to them as an essential component of democracy.<sup>16</sup>

This legislation created a large new BStU bureaucracy known after its first president as the Gauck Office, which was tasked with organizing the files, regulating their use, and providing information on a case-by-case basis. Since intellectuals considered the way the government had addressed the Nazi past inadequate, the public now insisted that it deal with communist crimes more quickly and thoroughly. Most vocal in this regard were the numerous victims of the Stasi, who

15 Joachim Gauck, *Die Stasi-Akten. Das unheimliche Erbe der DDR* (Reinbeck, 1991). One of the first disclosures from the files was the volume “*Ich liebe euch doch alle!*” *Befehle und Lageberichte des MfS, Januar-November 1989*, ed. Armin Mitter and Stefan Woll (Berlin, 1990), during the debate about the future of the files.

16 Siegfried Suckut and Jürgen Weber, *Stasi-Akten zwischen Politik und Zeitgeschichte. Eine Zwischenbilanz* (Munich, 2003); and Joachim Gauck, “Wir sagten unserer Angst auf Wiedersehen,” in *Die demokratische Revolution in der DDR*, ed. Eckart Conze et al. (Cologne, 2009), 154–69.

wished to document their suffering in order to be rehabilitated and compensated. Politicians also wanted reliable evidence to support the Bundestag Commission of Inquiry's investigations into the abuses of the SED dictatorship and thereby combat post-communist nostalgia. Journalists were eager to feed the public appetite for scandals with details of former abuses that discredited many well-known East Germans like the Olympic figure skater Katarina Witt. Finally, foreign secret services were happy to recruit turncoats and to acquire access to secret files such as the Rosenholz list, which exposed HV A operatives in the West.<sup>17</sup> What started as a laudable effort at enlightenment therefore soon assumed a more problematic guise.

The lustration process of de-Stasification was rather rigorous and formalistic. The purge was justified with the understandable argument that the nascent democracy should not be burdened by the official perpetrators or secret supporters of prior repression. Every applicant for public employment had to fill out a detailed questionnaire, listing all prior affiliations with the SED or MfS. If one admitted involvement, one was barred from such work, and if one did not but was found out, then one would be fired for lying. For all higher officials and politicians, a regular inquiry was submitted to the BStU seeking to clarify whether they bore any trace of collaboration in the voluminous Stasi records. If one had been an informal informant, one was usually excluded as well. To avoid the humiliation of being dismissed, some like Michael Brie voluntarily resigned, but the majority developed a strange case of amnesia. At the Humboldt University, a student committee found 12 employees and 155 informants of the Stasi among 780 faculty members, 67 of whom were still active in police training, the natural sciences, and international studies.<sup>18</sup>

In spite of the political commitment to avoid past mistakes, the effort of "transitional justice" has produced somewhat disappointing results. Due to the partial destruction of records, requests for Stasi information from the BStU have sometimes yielded somewhat contradictory replies, for example, suggesting that a person had some degree of culpability without establishing the exact extent. As a result, the evaluation of ambiguous cases like that of HU president Heinrich Fink has been left to the courts, which, in turn, have found it difficult to decide how much to trust Stasi records. For some popular figures like Manfred Stolpe or Gregor Gysi, the public has even been willing to overlook evidence of involvement. Moreover, the public's fixation on formal Stasi membership has all too often prevented people from

17 Joachim Gauck, *Winter im Sommer, Frühling im Herbst. Erinnerungen* (Munich, 2009). See Andrew Beattie, *Playing Politics with History: The Bundestag Inquiries into East Germany* (New York, 2008); and Robert Gerald Livingston, "An Operation Called 'Rosenholz' — How the CIA Bought the Stasi Files for \$75,000," *Atlantic Times*, March 2006.

18 John O. Koehler, "The Stasi and De-Stasification," in *Dismantling Tyranny: Transitioning Beyond Totalitarian Regimes*, ed. Ilan Berman and J. Michael Waller (Oxford, 2006), 43–74; and Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, "Die Humboldt Universität zu Berlin und das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit," in *Geschichte der Humboldt Universität*, vol. 3, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (Berlin, 2012).

engaging in a substantive evaluation of the severity of an individual transgression. Hence, only a couple dozen court cases have resulted in prison sentences for perpetrators among the tens of thousands of human rights violations committed under Stasi control. Although legal prosecution has remained a blunt sword, full disclosure was so successful in dispelling apologetic myths that other East European countries eventually followed the German approach.<sup>19</sup>

### A Poisonous Legacy

On a personal level, the revelations about Stasi collaboration have tended to poison relations, ruining friendships and sometimes even breaking up marriages. Though the names of perpetrators have been blacked out, the several million East Germans who have read their files in the past two decades have been shocked to discover proof that many members of their personal circle informed on them to the secret police. While denunciation also flourished in the Third Reich, ratting on one's neighbors was even more widespread in the GDR. Subsequent revelations of such abuses of trust have had devastating effects, since, as in our relationship with the Deichs, they leave a feeling of being sullied by the breaking of a fundamental interpersonal bond. Dissidents like Vera Lengsfeld, writers like Christa Wolf, and foreign observers like Timothy Garton Ash have been astounded by the energy and inventiveness spent on observing them — and by the triviality of most of the recorded details. At the same time, it has been distressing to ascertain how paltry the rewards were, since a little idealist rhetoric, personal praise, or some money seemed to have sufficed in most cases to motivate informers to report.<sup>20</sup> The result has been the spread of distrust and cynicism in the East.

In public perception, fixation on the Stasi records has fostered the development of a sort of tunnel vision that sees the hand of the secret service everywhere, even where it was not. The inclusion of some of the most brutal prisons like Hohenschönhausen in the memorial funding of the federal government is to be applauded because the Stasi's human rights violations have to be documented where they occurred. A lecture by a former inmate, livened up by personal reminiscences of physical or psychological torture, leaves a deeper impression than a textbook assignment.<sup>21</sup> But the alarmism of the director of this penitentiary, Hubertus Knabe, about the Stasi's penetration of the Federal Republic is rather excessive, disgusting as instances of collaboration may have been. For example, his thesis that the student movement

19 James McAdams, *Judging the Past in Unified Germany* (New York, 2001); and Helga Welsh, "When Discourse Trumps Policy: Transitional Justice in Unified Germany," *German Politics* 15 (2006): 137–52.

20 Vera Lengsfeld, *Mein Weg zur Freiheit. Von nun an ging's bergauf* (Munich, 2002); Hermann Vinke, ed., *Akteneinsicht Christa Wolf. Zerrspiegel und Dialog*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Hamburg, 1993); and Timothy Garton Ash, *The File: A Personal History* (New York, 1997). See Eric A. Johnson, *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, 2005).

21 Hubertus Knabe, ed., *Gefangen in Hohenschönhausen. Stasi-Häftlinge berichten* (Berlin, 2009); and Gabriele Schnell, ed., *Das "Lindenhof". Berichte aus dem Potsdamer Geheimdienstgefängnis*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Berlin, 2009).

of 1968 was a creature of the GDR clearly overshoots the mark since it confuses financial assistance for the leftist journal *Konkret* with control over editorial content.<sup>22</sup> Seeing the world only through the eyes of Stasi perpetrators or victims, therefore, runs the risk of retrospective exaggeration and ignores the relative normalcy of life around them.

In academic terms, the Stasi fixation has supported the *Unrechtsstaat* interpretation wherein the GDR is regarded as a gigantic prison. Such a neo-totalitarian view correctly emphasizes the structural similarities between the SED regime and the Nazi system, but the simplistic equation “red equals brown” tends to ignore their basic ideological antagonism and the enormous difference in the number of respective victims. More discerning German scholars (e.g., Martin Sabrow) and most Anglo-American historians (e.g., Mary Fulbrook) instead stress the importance of so-called soft stabilizers of communist rule such as utopian appeals or material incentives in producing that “reluctant loyalty” which kept the GDR afloat for four decades. The latter approach also comes closer to the memory of the majority of East Germans who sought to lead a normal life within an abnormal system, and, though always aware of the threat of sanction, tried to ignore it as much as possible. The problem of one-sided fixation on repression is its scapegoating of the Stasi as the source of all evil in the GDR.<sup>23</sup> Oppression and everyday life must rather be seen as interrelated halves of the same coin.

Among former operatives, the massive media criticism of the Stasi legacy has produced an astounding role reversal in which many perpetrators now claim to be victims of an ideological purge. When confronted by individuals whom they had mistreated in the GDR, most officers have remained silent or denied any wrongdoing so as not to become legally liable and to keep faith with their peers. Others, more adept in the media, have used the *tu quoque* argument, pointing out that they merely did the same thing as everyone else since Western states also had espionage services or a political police. This argument even convinced the German Supreme Court to accept foreign spying as legitimate. Yet others portray the barring of Stasi officers and collaborators from public employment or political careers as a revival of McCarthyism, an anti-communist crusade based on “class justice.”<sup>24</sup> While the reluctance to admit their misdeeds is understandable, the utter lack of contrition among most of the perpetrators has fed a retrospective glorification of the GDR that, in turn, only hardens Western condemnation.

As a symbol of the mysteries of human depravity and the contradictions of the GDR, the Stasi is likely to remain a subject of cultural

22 Hubertus Knabe, *Die unterwanderte Republik. Stasi im Westen* (Berlin, 1999); and idem, *Der diskrete Charme der DDR. Stasi und die Westmedien* (Berlin, 2001).

23 Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London, 2004). See also Martin Sabrow, ed., *Wohin treibt die DDR-Erinnerung? Dokumentation einer Debatte* (Göttingen, 2007); and Mary Fulbrook, *Ein ganz normales Leben: Alltag und Gesellschaft in der DDR*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Darmstadt, 2011).

24 Matthias Wagner, *Das Stasi-Syndrom. Über den Umgang mit den Akten des MfS in den 90er Jahren* (Berlin, 2001); Herbert Kierstein and Gotthold Schramm, *Freischützen des Rechtsstaats. Wem nützen Stasiunterlagen und Gedenkstätten?* (Berlin, 2009), 9–14. See also Barbara Miller, *Narratives of Guilt and Compliance in Unified Germany: Stasi Informers and Their Impact on Society* (London, 1999).

projections for years to come. Harassed writers like Reiner Kunze, Erich Loest, and Stefan Heym initially responded by publishing their files in order to recreate the climate of fear, as well as to expose the absurdities of surveillance. More imaginatively, author Wolfgang Hilbig explored in the surrealist satire *“Ich”* how literary collaboration with the secret service progressively destroyed the personality of his protagonist writer-informant as it forced him to serve an inhuman regime.<sup>25</sup> In films, the Stasi could be reduced to ironic clichés as in Leander Haussmann’s *Sonnenallee*, an upbeat recollection of growing up on the wrong side of the Wall. Or it might be the topic of a probing melodrama as in Henckel von Donnersmarck’s prize-winning movie *The Lives of Others*, which portrays the East Berlin theater scene through the eyes of a Stasi observer who eventually tries to protect his subjects. The success of Uwe Tellkamp’s meticulous reconstruction of Dresden’s educated middle class during the last decade of the GDR in his novel *Der Turm* shows that the Stasi still wields much posthumous power and continues to attract and frighten spectators at the same time.<sup>26</sup>

### The Challenge of Historicization

Two decades after reunification, the time has come to historicize the Stasi by treating it as if it were really part of the past. But in order for efforts at public enlightenment about the nefarious practices of the East German secret service to remain effective, their approach needs to be changed in several fundamental ways: First, the MfS must be removed from political controversies and no longer instrumentalized for discrediting current opponents by accusations of collaboration. Second, the Stasi reporting in the media should stop being sensationalist but ought rather to become more factual and nuanced so as to convey the ambiguities of living in the SED welfare dictatorship. Finally, the Federal Office of Stasi Records (BStU) has to be dissolved and its records turned over to the Bundesarchiv, since the special tasks of providing victims access to their files and supplying personnel information for hiring have largely been completed. Only by opening the finding aids and documents to all qualified researchers without privileging BStU members will scholarly studies of the Stasi be able to achieve full credibility.<sup>27</sup>

Historians also face the task of developing a more realistic picture of what the East German security service actually did or did not do. Media-driven revelations that titillate public interest may sell

25 Reiner Kunze, *Deckname “Lyrik”. Eine Dokumentation* (Frankfurt, 1990); Stefan Heym, *Der Winter unseres Missvergnügens. Aus den Aufzeichnungen des OV Diversant* (Munich, 1996); Erich Loest, *Die Stasi war mein Eckermann oder Mein Leben mit der Wanze* (Göttingen, 1991); Wolfgang Hilbig, *“Ich”. Roman* (Frankfurt, 1993).

26 Leander Haussmann, *Sonnenallee. Es war einmal im Osten* (Pfäffikon, 1999); Henckel von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der Anderen* (Culver City, 2007); and Uwe Tellkamp, *Der Turm* (Frankfurt, 2008). See also Brad Prager, “Passing Time since the Wende: Recent German Film on Unification,” *German Politics and Society* 28 (2010): 95–110.

27 Sven Felix Kellerhoff, “Die Pannenserie der Stasi-Unterlagenbehörde,” *Die Welt*, March 6, 2010. On advocacy for open access, see Dorota Darowska, Agnes Bensussan, Nicolas Beaupre, eds., *Die Überlieferung der Diktaturen. Beiträge zum Umgang mit Archiven der Geheimpolizei in Polen und Deutschland nach 1989* (Essen, 2004).

newspapers or raise TV ratings, but they only mythologize the Stasi by making it appear larger than life. Serious research has already unearthed much information about the size of the MfS, its internal structures, the orders issued to its members, its shifting surveillance priorities, and the like. But considerably less known is its exact role in different areas of society, which ranged considerably from saturation to marginal presence. Moreover, a focus on spectacular foreign espionage cases tends to obscure the GDR's failure to convert such information into technological gains or policy initiatives. What is needed, therefore, is a series of micro-studies that explore the mundane functioning of the Stasi in important social institutions like the universities. Only further empirical research will be able to resolve the contradiction between its vast information gathering concerning the popular mood and the SED's inadequate political response to it.<sup>28</sup>

The interpretative challenge consists of reconciling two disparate findings — the MfS's longtime control of GDR society and its ultimate inability to stem the system's collapse. On the one hand, the Stasi was an essential prop of the SED dictatorship that compensated for the regime's weakness of popular support. Especially after *Ostpolitik* had begun to erode the solidity of the Wall, the rapidly growing secret service was instrumental in maintaining the *Abgrenzung* by combating Western influences. Situated on the frontlines of the Cold War, the MfS was able to obtain more NATO secrets than other Warsaw Pact spies because of its cultural proximity to the FRG. On the other hand, the Stasi showed a strange inability to deal with the growth of internal dissent, which it misconstrued as subversion from the outside. Due to the rise of East-West détente and Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union, service operatives increasingly lost the bearings they needed to develop effective counter-strategies because they failed to realize that demands for democracy could come from inside "real existing socialism." Ironically, the fixation on external subversion that had stabilized the GDR for four decades proved fatal when confronted with the popular challenge in 1989.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, the Stasi legacy needs to be integrated into the longer-range narratives of German history. In one view, the communist dictatorship's heartless repression of its population by means of the MfS fits into the catastrophic version of the twentieth century that emphasizes the servility of human nature to power. Moreover, the sacrifice of individual lives for a greater cause is part of the contest of modernizing ideologies in which even the realization of a purportedly progressive

28 Jens Gieseke, ed., *Stasi und Gesellschaft. Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR* (Göttingen, 2007); and the micro-study by Steffen Reichert, *Unter Kontrolle. Die Martin-Luther-Universität und das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit 1968-1989* (Halle, 2007).

29 Dennis, *Stasi*, 211ff.; Gieseke, *Mielke Konzern*, 247ff.; Süß, *Staatssicherheit*, passim.

utopia produced immense suffering. But from another perspective, the Stasi story also has an encouraging message since it demonstrates that it is possible to overthrow sinister repression when enough people have the courage to challenge it with civil disobedience. This alternate reading, symbolized by the peaceful revolution in the fall of 1989, shows that even a cowed people like the East Germans can ultimately choose human rights over shameful complicity.<sup>30</sup> It is this double significance of the Stasi's ruthless effort to terrorize its own people and of that people's courageous resistance to it that will make the Stasi legacy a fascinating subject for a long time to come.

<sup>30</sup> Konrad H. Jarausch, "Beyond the National Narrative: Implications of Reunification for Recent German History," *German History* 28 (2010): 498–514.

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