

THE SOCIALIST UNITY PARTY (SED) AND THE STASI: A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

Walter Süß

While there were some constants in the nearly four-decade relationship between the ruling East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) and the Stasi, there were also various stages and dramatic breaks — such as the Uprising of June 1953 and the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 — that impacted the relationship and Stasi activities. Two equally popular yet mutually exclusive slogans that have been used to describe this relationship are, on the one hand, that the Stasi constituted the “sword and shield of the party” as an institution that existed in order to enforce and protect the party’s prerogatives and thus was only the party’s handservant, and, on the other, that the Stasi constituted a “state within the state” — i.e., it was an independent actor largely outside the party’s control. Although both formulations come directly from the people involved and have served retroactively to shift responsibility onto the other institution, the truth is not somewhere in the middle but is much more complicated than such simple formulas suggest.

This paper will try to fill out this complexity by outlining the development of the relationship between the party and the Stasi, focusing on its structural characteristics as seen from a historical perspective. It will address the establishment of the Stasi and its basic relationship with the SED, problems that arose in this relationship in light of the presence of Soviet secret services in East Germany, forms of concrete collaboration between the Stasi and SED officials, as well as the end of the Stasi/SED relationship in the waning days of the GDR.

The Institutional Relationship

The Ministry for State Security (MfS) was established on February 8, 1950, on the basis of a law approved unanimously and without debate by the East German parliament, the Volkskammer. It came into effect ten days later — February 18, 1950, the true founding date of the Stasi — when it was ratified by President Wilhelm Pieck. The act, which did not mention the communist party, the SED, was laconically brief: “The main department for the protection of the national economy of the Ministry of Interior will be transformed into

an independent Ministry of State Security.”¹ Yet the law was adopted on the basis of an unpublicized SED Politburo decision — a fact that revealed the true power relations.²

To some extent, the relationship between the party and the Stasi was made official at the Third SED Party Congress in June 1950. The party issued an order stating that the organs of state security were to improve their work in order to “unmask and eliminate the enemies of the working class and agents of imperialism.”³ This made it very clear who set the tone. This order also highlighted the two main functions of the Stasi: external defense and internal repression — that is, the Stasi structurally had a dual nature as both an intelligence service and the secret police.

Even while the Stasi was still being formed, one could see two opposing structural characteristics in the GDR as a state. While SED leaders were anxious to keep all parts of the state apparatus under their direction and control, they nonetheless maintained a formal division between party and state. This was not a foregone conclusion, given their absolute claim to power. They might also have fused the two apparatuses, and the question of why they never attempted to do so merits its own consideration. In the case of the Stasi, however, the party came much closer to fusion than with any other government organ because the Stasi had to be absolutely trustworthy to the party to fulfill its main tasks: enforcing and safeguarding party rule with secret-police means.

There was, of course, an ideological character to the aforementioned slogan that the Stasi constituted the “shield and sword of the party.” Whereas the purpose of the Stasi was to secure overall party domination, it was not “the” party as a collective body that made use of it but rather — to use the term of East German dissident thinker Rudolf Bahro — the “politbureaucracy.”⁴ This politbureaucracy consisted of the SED’s top leadership and the full-time party apparatus, which numbered around 40,000 employees in 1989. It was the Stasi’s duty to keep East German society under control, including the mass of party members that made up more than one-sixth of the adult population. The party’s dictatorship over state and society was possible only to the extent that the party apparatus could maintain its control over the around two-and-a-half million party members.⁵

Even before the MfS was established, security organs dedicated to the same task had been in place. They had acted under the guidance of

1 GBl [Gesetzblatt] DDR 1950, No.15, 21.2.1950, p. 95.

2 Decision by the SED-Politbüro of 24.1.1950, excerpt in Dierk Hoffmann, Karl-Heinz Schmidt, and Peter Skyba, eds., *Die DDR vor dem Mauerbau. Dokumente zur Geschichte des anderen deutschen Staates 1949-1961* (Munich, 1993), 55-56.

3 “Die gegenwärtige Lage und die Aufgaben der SED,” in Protokoll des III. Parteitag, 225-75, here 251-52. On the exact circumstances of this campaign in the GDR, see Karl Wilhelm Fricke, *Warten auf Gerechtigkeit. Kommunistische Säuberungen und Rehabilitierungen. Bericht und Dokumentation* (Cologne, 1971); Georg Hermann Hodos, *Schauprozesse. Stalinistische Säuberungen in Osteuropa 1948-1954* (Frankfurt and New York, 1988), 176-98; Wilfriede Otto, “Visionen zwischen Hoffnung und Täuschung,” in Thomas Klein, Wilfriede Otto, and Peter Grieder, *Visionen. Repression und Opposition in der SED (1949-1989)* (Frankfurt/Oder, 1996), 217-22; Hermann Weber, “Schauprozess-Vorbereitungen in der DDR,” in *Kommunisten verfolgen Kommunisten: stalinistischer Terror und “Säuberungen” in den kommunistischen Parteien Europas seit den dreißiger Jahren*, ed. Hermann Weber and Dietrich Staritz (Berlin, 1993), 436-49.

4 See Rudolf Bahro, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* (London, 1978).

5 See 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.

the Soviet security organs in the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany and in cooperation with the intelligence structures in the SED party apparatus.⁶ They had not only supported denazification but also the establishment of the dictatorship by breaking all resistance to the occupation regime and the processes of economic and political transformation. Within the party, the security organs' first priority was to discipline the Social Democrats, who were suspected of maintaining oppositional ideas after their party's forced merger with the East German communists.⁷

Given the political nature of the Stasi's main aim, only carefully selected, politically loyal and faithful individuals were eligible to work for the organization; professional qualifications played only a minor role in its early years. As the guidelines for the Stasi's cadre work from the early 1950s stated, "Employment in the . . . state security service is open only to screened and politically blameless members of the SED and the FDJ [the communist youth organization]."⁸ This prerequisite for the Stasi was distinct from those of other parts of the state apparatus, such as the state police (Volkspolizei) and the army, where a number of opportunists and fellow travelers were able to join the ranks. The People's Army included even former Wehrmacht officers in its early years. But the Stasi tolerated lack of party membership at best only temporarily — in the case of newly acquired cadres or employees in its few civilian services.⁹ Particularly in the Stasi's formative years, candidates for recruitment not only had to be party members but they also had to pass a sort of preselection to make the short list. Although it is not mentioned in the directive cited above, eyewitnesses have reported that early on, Soviet "advisers" had to give their consent as well before the MfS could recruit a given candidate.¹⁰

The Stasi and the Soviet Institutions

As this unwritten recruitment requirement underscores, the Stasi did, indeed, have a dual loyalty in its early years; its second master was the Soviet occupation authorities. Soviet intelligence had placed former Soviet agents at the top of the East German repression apparatus, including the first two Ministers for State Security Wilhelm Zaisser and Ernst Wollweber, and, to a certain extent, the third minister Erich Mielke.

It was not only at the top that the Soviets relied on former agents in these early years; Soviet agents were present everywhere in the Stasi during its early years, and the minister himself had his own Soviet "chief adviser." Soviet "friends" also often participated at meetings of

6 See Jan Foitzik and Nikita W. Petrow, *Die sowjetischen Geheimdienste in der SBZ/DDR von 1945 bis 1953* (Berlin et al., 2009); Jens Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern. Die Geschichte der Stasi 1945-1990* (Munich, 2006), 39-50.

7 See Andreas Malycha and Peter Jochen Winters, *Die SED. Geschichte einer deutschen Partei* (Munich, 2009), 79-92; Klein, Otto, und Grieder, *Visionen*, 170-229.

8 Dienstanweisung No. 43/53 of 6.11.1953, quoted in Jens Gieseke, "Die Hauptamtlichen 1962. Zur Personalstruktur des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit," *Deutschland Archiv* 27 (1994): 940-53, here 950.

9 See Jens Gieseke, "Erst braun, dann rot? Zur Beschäftigung ehemaliger Nationalsozialisten als hauptamtliche Mitarbeiter des MfS," in *Staatspartei und Staatssicherheit*, ed. Siegfried Suckut, and Walter Süß (Berlin, 1997), 129-50.

10 See Jens Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter der Staatssicherheit. Personalstruktur und Lebenswelt 1950-1989/90* (Berlin, 2000), 79-81.

the council or Kollegium, the highest collective body in the MfS, and Soviet instructors who had insight into all operational processes were assigned to all heads of administrative units or subdepartments.¹¹ Of course, it was conceivable that conflict would arise in such a situation, and Stasi chief Wollweber made it clear at a staff meeting in 1953 that agents should ultimately defer to the Soviets in such cases: “If a Soviet instructor intervenes . . . you can show that you have a mind of your own, but you have to follow the advice of the instructor.”¹²

Soviet advisors also directed large operations, including the mass arrests between 1953 and 1955. The largest of these campaigns was Action “Blitz,” in which 521 people were arrested. There is an interesting comment written in pencil in the margins of the operational plan for this action that someone obviously forgot to erase: “Translated from the Russian.”¹³ This points to another characteristic of Soviet involvement in the Stasi: the Soviets sought to leave behind as few traces as possible, and were largely successful in this throughout the history of their cooperation with the Stasi, up to the very end.

The dominance of the Soviet secret police in the Stasi created problems for the SED leadership. In the end, it was a question of power. When political differences between the SED and the CPSU (the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) arose, it was almost impossible to know whose side the secret police would take. This issue underlay Ernst Wollweber’s removal as Minister for State Security. A confidant of the Soviets, he was replaced by Erich Mielke, Ulbricht’s confidant, in 1957.¹⁴

In the mid-1950s, the Soviets began to limit their visibility in the Eastern European satellite states in general. Due to this reorientation, the influence of Soviet advisors on the Stasi also waned, and the number of “consultants” was drastically reduced, leaving only 32 Soviet “liaison officers” in the GDR. However, Soviet influence was still palpable. There were Soviet liaison officers in the Ministry in Berlin and in the district offices, and these positions still had considerable weight. Moreover, the Soviet and East German secret services cooperated closely on all levels — from the minister down to the individual departments, facilitated by the proximity of the KGB Residency in Berlin-Karlshorst, whose several hundred employees primarily spied on the West.¹⁵

The Legal Framework for the Ministry of State Security

The law on the Ministry for State Security did not mention the party, but the secret first “statute” of the MfS signed on October 15, 1953, by East

11 See Jens Gieseke, *Das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit 1950 bis 1989/90. Ein kurzer historischer Abriss*, BF informiert 21 (Berlin, 1998), 10; Bernhard Marquardt, “Die Zusammenarbeit zwischen MfS und KGB,” in *Materialien der Enquete-Kommission “Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland” (12. Wahlperiode des Deutschen Bundestages)*, ed. Deutscher Bundestag (Baden-Baden, 1995), 8:297–361, here 301–303.

12 Staff meeting at 21.8.1953; BStU, MfS, SdM 1921, p. 228.

13 In Karl-Wilhelm Fricke and Roger Engelmann, “Konzentrierte Schläge”. *Staatssicherheitsaktionen und politische Prozesse in der DDR 1953–1956* (Berlin, 1998), 29.

14 See Roger Engelmann, and Silke Schumann, “Der Ausbau des Überwachungsstaates. Der Konflikt Ulbricht-Wollweber und die Neuausrichtung des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der DDR 1957,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 43 (1995): 341–78.

15 See Roger Engelmann and Walter Süß, “Verhältnis des MfS zum sowjetischen Geheimdienst,” in *Das MfS-Lexikon. Begriffe, Personen und Strukturen der Staatssicherheit der DDR*, ed. Roger Engelmann et al. (Berlin, 2011), 275–79.

German Premier Otto Grotewohl remedied this.¹⁶ As with the law establishing the MfS, this occurred after the party had made a secret decision.¹⁷ This secret statute at last formally defined the relationship between Stasi and the party, explicitly stating that the decisions of the leading party organs were of primary importance for the MfS and that the laws of the East German state came second. This was no doubt carried out in practice.

Ernst Wollweber, who became the Minister for State Security in 1953, expressed the nature of this relationship best during the SED Party Congress in 1954. Seeking to distance himself from his predecessor, Wilhelm Zaisser, Wollweber accused him of having disregarded “the leading role of the party.”¹⁸

Our comrades in State Security have a special mission, but it’s a party mission. . . . Our party — as has been shown in the unmasking of Zaisser — can rely on the comrades in State Security. That must be so, because the Stasi should be a sharp sword with which our party strikes the enemy relentlessly, no matter where he has established himself!¹⁹

Two aspects of this statement are remarkable: first, the definition of the Stasi as a “sword” of the party, and second, the stated willingness to act even against high-ranking party officials — after all, Zaisser had been a member of the Politburo. Wollweber certainly did not seek to proclaim the Stasi’s superiority over the party. Rather, he sought to emphasize its loyalty. His comment about the ministry’s willingness to strike the “enemy,” even if he is part of the top leadership, can be understood only as an expression of loyalty to party leader Walter Ulbricht. The Stasi lay at Ulbricht’s disposal. This was particularly so during the first half of the 1950s, when the Stasi had authority even over top officials. In 1956, Wollweber clarified the Stasi’s subordination to the Politburo in speaking to the Central Committee of the SED: “The arrest of important personalities . . . is not decided upon by the Stasi alone; rather, it submits these decisions to the Security Commission [of the Politburo].”²⁰

This Security Commission, a circle of top SED officials whose composition was ultimately decided upon by party chief Ulbricht, had been set up in 1953.²¹ The model for this likely came from the Soviet Union as it resembled the “leadership group” Stalin had set up in 1937 within the Politburo of the CPSU, whose members could order even the arrest and execution of Politburo members.²² Ulbricht

16 “Statut des Staatssekretariats für Staatssicherheit of 6.10.1953,” in *Grundsatzdokumente des MfS*, ed. Roger Engelmann and Frank Joestel, BStU (Berlin, 2004), 61–63.

17 Decision by the SED-Politbüro of 23.9.1953, Anhang; BArch-SAPMO, DY 30, J IV 2/202/62.

18 Decision by the SED-Politbüro of 23.9.1953, Anhang; BArch-SAPMO, DY 30, J IV 2/202/62, p. 4.

19 Cited by Karl Wilhelm Fricke, MfS intern (Cologne, 1991), 83.

20 BArch-SAPMO, IV 2/1/156, cited in *DDR vor dem Mauerbau*, 239–40.

21 See Armin Wagner, *Walter Ulbricht und die geheime Sicherheitspolitik der SED. Der Nationale Verteidigungsrat der DDR und seine Vorgeschichte (1953–1971)* (Berlin, 2002), 78–87.

22 See Oleg W. Chlewnjuk, *Das Politbüro. Mechanismen der Macht in der Sowjetunion der dreißiger Jahre* (Hamburg, 1998), 332–48.

23 See "Beschluss der Sicherheitskommission vom 16. Dezember 1954. Betr.: Maßnahmen zur Erhöhung der Sicherheit und zum verstärkten Schutz gegen das Eindringen von Agenten in den Parteiapparat"; VVS 1012/54; BStU, MfS, SdM 407, pp. 1–5.

24 This was also the case in the 1980s. When a political employee of an SED local administration fled to the West, the Stasi demanded a review of the bureaucracies of the district and local administrations. The Stasi played only an auxiliary role. Mielke's relevant order declared "that the review must be undertaken by employees of the SED local administrations themselves." MfS Der Minister, Schreiben an die Leiter der BVfS vom 18.10.1983; BStU, MfS, DSt 102978.

25 See "Richtlinie 1/68 für die Zusammenarbeit mit Gesellschaftlichen Mitarbeitern für Sicherheit und Inoffiziellen Mitarbeitern im Gesamtsystem der Sicherung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik"; reprint in *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit. Richtlinien und Durchführungsbestimmungen*, ed. Helmut Müller-Enbergs (Berlin, 1996), 242–82, here 261.

26 No relevant party resolution or internal Stasi order can be found. However, in the archival files of various unofficial collaborators (IMs), there is an abundance of individual examples.

27 See Roger Engelmann, Staatssicherheitsjustiz im Aufbau: Zur Entwicklung geheimpolizeilicher und justitieller Strukturen im Bereich der politischen Strafverfolgung 1950–1963, in *Justiz im Dienste der Parteiherrschaft: Rechtspraxis und Staatssicherheit in der DDR*, ed. Roger Engelmann and Clemens Vollnhals (Berlin, 1999), 133–64, here 156–60; Falco Werkentin, *Politische Strafjustiz in der Ära Ulbricht. Vom bekennenden Terror zur verdeckten Repression*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1997), 349–55, 379.

stopped short of doing this with leading comrades; after all, times had changed since Stalin had died. Nevertheless, the Security Commission was a strange construction even under GDR conditions: a party board not subject to any legal regulations — not even those provided by the party's constitution — that directly oversaw a state institution.

Wollweber's reference to the necessary permission for the arrest of important persons reflected a limitation on the decision-making authority of the Stasi. In fact, the Stasi was allowed to police anyone in the entire full-time party apparatus only under exceptional circumstances and under Ulbricht's direct control.²³ The use of the Stasi as a tool in internal party struggles was ultimately dangerous to the party leadership itself as it might then become independent and turn against its own creator. Therefore, some caution was necessary. The GDR leadership placed specific limitations on the Stasi, including a ban on investigating full-time employees of the party apparatus,²⁴ and on recruiting SED members as unofficial collaborators.²⁵ Although this second rule was continually broken, SED members who made a career in the party apparatus were definitely off-limits to the Stasi and had to break off any unofficial contact with the relevant cadres.²⁶ Outside the party apparatus, simple party members were never safe from the Stasi, but in later years, the Stasi mainly acted as an informant for the Party Control Commission in such cases.

It should now be clear that the party leadership determined the scope of the Stasi's activities, including what rules it had to observe. In the 1950s, the Stasi's leash was very long, and it engaged in relentlessly brutal repression. Though this seemingly derived from the instructions of the Soviet "advisers," who simply imported their own methods, this fact alone cannot explain the Stasi's brutality. When Soviet influence declined markedly in the second half of the 1950s and Ulbricht felt more in charge following a short phase of liberalization after the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU, the Stasi intensified the prosecution of political crimes, although it no longer achieved the high number of convictions that it had in the early 1950s.²⁷

Also contributing to the Stasi's brutality were developments within the Soviet bloc. The Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU in 1956 and the beginnings of de-Stalinization had spread great uncertainty among the Eastern European regimes. When the situation seemed under control again, the ruling communist parties met for a conference in Moscow in November 1957 and announced a new general line to guide their actions. Crucially, the concluding "statement" of this

conference made the parties' stance against revisionism perfectly clear: "Under present circumstances, the main danger is revisionism, or, in other words, right-wing opportunism."²⁸

This anti-revisionism was a new concept of the enemy with far-reaching political implications. Ulbricht warmly welcomed it as a rejection of all attempts at reform. Three months later, a plenum of the SED Central Committee declared an end to the "opportunistic interpretation of the results of the 20th Party Congress" — in other words, an end to de-Stalinization. It criticized the old leadership of the MfS under Wollweber for having concentrated too much on work against the West while neglecting the need for internal repression without mentioning that the Soviet security services had ordered it so. Rather, the plenum characterized this setting of priorities as "short-sightedness regarding the enemy's . . . ideological and material subversion."²⁹

Against this backdrop, Erich Mielke . who had previously served as Walter Ulbricht's confidant within the upper reaches of the Stasi, was appointed the new head of State Security. In his report on the Central Committee Plenum, Mielke drew the necessary conclusion regarding the Stasi's political reorientation at a meeting of its internal council, the Kollegium. Part of this reorientation involved fighting "ideological subversion," a term he coined and defined as "the enemy's method aimed at the party's disintegration in order to eliminate its leading role in building socialism and to soften up the GDR and the entire socialist camp."³⁰

The reactionary turn under Khrushchev, wherein "revisionism" was defined as the "main danger," was politically disastrous. Within the Soviet Union, however, it was of limited duration; it represented a tactical maneuver in the factional struggle at the top of the CPSU. In contrast, in the GDR, the SED's leaders and the MfS maintained this reorientation and took it to the next level, associating all forms of political dissent with "enemy" activities and thereby stigmatizing them. From this point on, the Stasi could justify combatting and suppressing even the most carefully voiced criticism as a form of "subversion," which stifled political life in the GDR.

All of this was done in consultation with the party's leaders, of course. The SED set the political line at Party Congresses, Plenums of the Central Committee, and meetings of the Politburo. The MfS then communicated the party's line throughout its hierarchy at personnel

28 "Erklärung der Beratung von Vertretern der kommunistischen und Arbeiterparteien der sozialistischen Länder, die vom 14. bis 16. November 1957 in Moskau stattfand," *Einheit* 12 (1957): 1473-85.

29 "Bericht des Politbüros auf dem 35. Plenum des ZK der SED, 3.2.1958," reprinted in Roger Engelmann and Silke Schumann, *Kurs auf die entwickelte Diktatur. Walter Ulbricht, die Entmachtung Ernst Wollwebers und die Neuausrichtung des Staatssicherheitsdienstes 1956/57* (Berlin, 1995), 65-70.

30 Engelmann and Schumann, *Kurs*, 26.

conferences and meetings of its party organizations, coupled with the demand to “analyze” it, that is, to draw conclusions from it for its own work. This was also important for conceptualizing the “enemy,” which served to confirm the Stasi personnel’s ideology, orientation, and motivation. Several conceptions of the “enemy” handed down from the SED were relatively constant, such as “imperialism” and “foreign subversive centers,” but others changed with the political situation, like the aforementioned term, “ideological subversion.” The Stasi, for its part, had the potential to influence the development of such negative images by means of its reporting to the SED, for example, by hyping certain “threats.”

The National Defense Council

As we saw above, in the 1950s the Stasi was subordinated to a Security Commission of the Politburo, which was a somewhat strange construction even under East German conditions. In 1960, this changed when a law established the National Defense Council as the successor organization to the Security Commission; this formalized the relationship between the SED’s leadership and the “armed services”³¹ and subordinated the latter once again to a government institution. The Security Services were still subordinated to SED leaders because only high-ranking SED functionaries sat on the National Defense Council. (This was different from the State Council, the collective head of state, which also at least included representatives of the bloc parties.) Only the Chairman of the National Defense Council was authorized to issue directives to subordinate state organs, but he was typically the same person as the Chairman of the State Council and the First Secretary of the SED Central Committee, so this personal union created a statutory link to the party.³² The National Defense Council was responsible not only for the country’s preparations for armed defense but also for “defense against counterrevolutionary activities,”³³ both functions it had assumed from the Security Commission.

The subordination of all state organs and thus also the Stasi to the communist party was first fixed in law in the Constitution of the GDR of 1968, which, in Article 1, defined the state as “the political organization of workers in the city and on the land under the leadership of the working class and its Marxist-Leninist party.”³⁴ Then, in 1969, a second statute for the State Security was issued that expressed this subordination in more concrete terms. This second statute replaced that of 1953 and remained in force until the end of the GDR. Just like

31 Gesetz über die Bildung des Nationalen Verteidigungsrates der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik vom 10.2.1960; GBl DDR I, Nr. 8 of 13.2.1960. See Wagner, *Walter Ulbricht*, 160–71.

32 “Statut des Nationalen Verteidigungsrates der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik” vom 23.10.1967; Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, DVW 39487, pp. 5–25, here p. 9.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

34 “Verfassung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik vom 6. April 1968 in der Neufassung vom 27. September 1974,” in *Verfassungen der kommunistischen Staaten*, ed. Georg Brunner and Boris Meissner (Paderborn et al., 1980), 95.

the first statute, this one stated the “bases” for the activity of the MfS at the very beginning. These were, first of all, the program and resolutions of the SED, and only thereafter the East German constitution, laws, and the resolutions of the National Defense Council.³⁵

In terms of the SED’s determination of the Stasi’s room for maneuver, it is important to note that both statutes — that of 1953 and 1969 — expressly approved the use of unofficial collaborators (“support from true patriots”),³⁶ as well as “[s]pecial means and methods.” This vague formulation served to justify secret searches of homes, bugging phones, reading mail, and other secret police interventions. It was a blank check that allowed the Stasi to engage in activities that were otherwise forbidden by GDR law. In other words, the Stasi could operate, to a certain extent, in a legal vacuum.

The Intertwining of the SED and Stasi Command Structures in the Honecker Era

Of the two phrases used to characterize the relationship between the party and the Stasi, we have so far examined only the view of the MfS as the “shield and the sword” of the politbureaucracy. To be sure, this was the Stasi’s dominant function. Nevertheless, talk of the Stasi as a “state within the state” — although it is inaccurate overall — does have a rational core.

A central problem arose during the rule of East German leader Erich Honecker from 1971 to 1989: the intertwining of the command structures of the SED and the Stasi. Both institutions were organized hierarchically: the SED, according to the principles of “democratic” — but, in fact, bureaucratic — centralism, and the MfS with military command structures.

The link at the top of both hierarchies was relatively simple after the conflicts of the early years. Under Ulbricht, the first two Ministers for State Security, Wilhelm Zaisser and Ernst Wollweber, had proved intractable and were removed from power after falling out with the party leader. Mielke, who was determined to succeed Wollweber, had plotted with Ulbricht against his superiors, making him particularly suitable for the office in Ulbricht’s eyes. At the same time, Ulbricht refused to integrate Mielke into the inner circle of power, the Politburo, which kept the lines of command clear. Nonetheless, as early as the 1960s, Mielke was able to successfully defend his fiefdom against control by the Central Committee apparatus.³⁷

35 “Statut des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 30.7.1969,” in *Grundsatzdokumente des MfS*, 183–88.

36 “Statut von 1969, § 4,” *ibid.*, 185.

37 See Siegfried Suckut, “Generalkontrollbeauftragter der SED oder gewöhnliches Staatsorgan? Probleme der Funktionsbestimmung des MfS in den sechziger Jahren,” in *Staatspartei und Staatssicherheit*, ed. Suckut, Süß, 151–68.

During the 1970s and 1980s under Honecker, the situation was more complicated. The new General Secretary made Mielke a candidate member of the Politburo in 1971 — the first time since 1953 that the head of the Stasi had belonged to the center of power. This fact alone constituted a major change under Honecker and increased the power of the Stasi. Yet, what was more, most of the issues that directly concerned the Stasi were not even addressed in the Politburo but in confidence between Honecker and Mielke, who met for this purpose on Tuesdays after Politburo meetings.³⁸ After Mielke was forced to resign in November 1989, he described the decision-making structure like this: “I couldn’t decide anything. I submitted, and received, approval for my decisions.”³⁹ Yet this was perhaps a little exaggerated as Mielke himself had boasted at other times of having influenced policy decisions with his information.

Although no records of these Tuesday conversations have survived, it is still possible to characterize the relationship between the two men and to gain insight into how Mielke managed to retain the sensitive post of Minister for State Security for thirty-two years. Mielke fully respected Honecker’s authority and respected his policy guidance even when it made his own situation more difficult. He maintained this attitude until shortly before Honecker’s fall from power, which was instigated by a third person.⁴⁰ At the same time, Mielke used his privileged access to the General Secretary to shield his rule from all others, even the Central Committee apparatus, and to extract maximum financial and personal resources for the Stasi. However, the structure of the relationship between Mielke and Honecker did not translate to the regional level, where military and party discipline could come into conflict. It would have violated the MfS hierarchy for a Stasi officer to be under the command of a local party functionary.

Beginning in 1976, when Mielke became a full member of the Politburo, even the rules regarding party discipline could be functionalized to shield the MfS. The Stasi chief now stood above all local party officials within the SED hierarchy. At the same time, there was a tighter centralization within the Stasi so that even small decisions had to be made at the top. For example, by the mid-1970s, the minister himself had to decide whether the local Stasi should prevent a civil-rights activist in Leipzig from speaking to an opposition circle. In talks with regional party officials, the local Stasi chief was able to argue that the issue had to be decided “in Berlin.” Most likely, at the top of the party hierarchy, the main form of communication between

38 See Reinhold Andert and Wolfgang Herzberg, *Der Sturz. Erich Honecker im Kreuzverhör* (Berlin, 1990), 367; Günter Schabowski, *Der Absturz* (Berlin, 1991), 115; Wolfgang Schwanz, “Die Sicherheitsspolitik der SED und das MfS,” *Zwie-Gespräch* 16 (1993): 1–12, here 3; Markus Wolf, *In eigenem Auftrag. Bekenntnisse und Einsichten* (Munich, 1991), 210.

39 Erich Mielke, “Vernehmung des Beschuldigten am 16.1.1990,” appendix in *Erich Mielke. Eine deutsche Karriere*, ed. Jochen von Lang (Berlin, 1991), 270–75, here 271.

40 The same was true of Mielke’s relationship with Ulbricht, whose downfall was also precipitated by a third person.

the party and Stasi was direct orders, whereas mutual information and cooperation likely predominated at the lower levels.

The interaction between the Stasi and the party during this period was quite close, with the regional Stasi offices supplying the SED with regular — often daily — “party information.” This included reports on all aspects of political and social life deemed important by the secret police, such as the mood and conversations in factories, the satellite parties, and “mass organizations”; activities by dissidents and the Church; and such mundane matters as supply bottlenecks, which could lead to greater dissatisfaction. In short, anything and everything that could jeopardize the stability of the regime was of interest. There were also verbal reports to the first secretaries of SED district and county organizations once a week from the head of the respective Stasi units.

Whether written or oral, there were certain rules regarding what information could be exchanged. Party officials were not to be informed of concrete unofficial collaborators (IMs), the general use of such IMs, nor secret operational methods. In other words, “sources and methods” were taboo topics for local party officials, as were current secret operations. In addition, information to party officials had to be edited so that it was impossible for the recipient to identify people currently subject to Stasi operations. However, the Stasi probably had to seek the party’s agreement to make arrests in political cases.

These restrictions were also in force within the party organization at the MfS. From as early as the mid-1950s, any discussion of the particulars of operational work at party meetings within the MfS was strictly forbidden. This means that intelligence and the methods of the secret police were shielded from the party. One should not conclude on this basis, however, that the Stasi was, in fact, a “state within the state.” Rather, these conspiratorial methods aimed to benefit the party, though they also provided the Stasi with unusual freedom of action. The party apparatus made the relevant political decisions, but the Stasi could influence these decisions by selecting the information that was passed on. The party apparatus had little opportunity to control this information because the Stasi preserved conspiratorial methods also in relation to the SED.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this description of the complex relationship between the Stasi and the SED by saying something about how it

ended. As we have seen, the Stasi always recognized and respected the party's prerogatives, and this was true even during the fall of 1989. The regime had fallen into a deep crisis — as we know, its final crisis. In its helplessness, the new SED leadership under Egon Krenz had proclaimed a policy of renunciation-of-force, of “change” and “dialogue.”⁴¹ Explaining the policy change at a meeting of his staff in mid-October, Minister Mielke declared the Stasi's complete compliance: “All measures taken by the Ministry for State Security must conform to the general line . . . and policy decisions of the Central Committee and its Politburo.”⁴² This was discipline to the point of demise.

In the weeks preceding the staff meeting, the Stasi, along with the Volkspolizei, had continued to practice police-state methods. They had dispersed demonstrations, beaten untold numbers of people, and placed thousands temporarily under arrest in an effort to prevent any disturbance of the GDR's fortieth anniversary celebrations, public events meant to bolster the regime. Nevertheless, the generals within the Stasi, not believing that it would be possible to overcome the crisis by means of repression alone, were waiting for an initiative from the new leadership that could politically mobilize the party's own base — something along the lines of the Soviet model of reform. Mielke had contributed to Honecker's removal because he had lost faith in him and his policies, but the new General Secretary, Egon Krenz, had turned out to be incompetent as well. His indecision and delays dashed any remaining hopes that the party could be reformed and discouraged even the staunchest regime supporters.

The Stasi generals reached the sobering conclusion that the “leading role of the party” was no more, even before the East German parliament adopted the relevant constitutional amendment on December 1, 1989. The Stasi, established as the ruling party's secret police, thus became redundant, and the generals were unable to provide any new direction to their subordinates. That the MfS was a mere tool of the politbureaucracy became clear once again as it reached its final end.

41 See Walter Süß, *Staatssicherheit am Ende. Warum es den Mächtigen nicht gelang, 1989 eine Revolution zu verhindern* (Berlin, 1999), 343–45.

42 BStU, MfS, ZAIG 4885, pp. 1–79, here p. 28.

Walter Süß was a leading research associate at the BStU until he retired in 2012. Before he joined the BStU in 1992, he worked at the Free University of Berlin as an expert on Soviet history and, from 1989–1992, as a journalist in (East) Berlin. He is associated with the Wilson Center's Cold War project. He has published broadly on the Stasi, the SED, and German unification. His book *Staatssicherheit am Ende: Warum es den Mächtigen nicht gelang, 1989 eine Revolution zu verhindern* (1999) remains a standard work of the history of the peaceful revolution.