

The Stasi

New Research on the East German
Ministry of State Security

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Klaus Bästlein, *Der Fall Mielke: Die Ermittlungen gegen den Minister für Staatssicherheit der DDR* [The Mielke Case: An Investigation of the GDR Minister of State Security]. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2002. 300 pp. ISBN 3-7890-7775-5. €25.00.

Manfred Bols, *Ende der Schweigepflicht: Aus dem Leben eines Geheimdienstlers* [An End to the Oath of Secrecy: Excerpts from a Secret Agent's Life]. Berlin: edition ost, 2002. 254 pp. ISBN 3-360-01037-X. €14.90.

Jens Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter der Staatssicherheit: Personalstruktur und Lebenswelt, 1950–1989/90* [The Full-Time Employees of State Security: Personnel Structure and Environment, 1950–89/90]. Berlin: Ch. Links, 2000. 615 pp. ISBN 3-86153-227-1. €24.50.

Jens Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern: Die Geschichte der Stasi, 1945–1990* [The Mielke Firm: A History of the Stasi, 1945–90]. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags Anstalt, 2001. 291 pp. ISBN 3-421-05481-9. €18.90.

Reinhard Grimmer, Werner Irmeler, Willi Opitz, and Wolfgang Schwanitz, eds., *Die Sicherheit: Zur Abwehrarbeit des MfS* [Security: On the Defense Work of the MfS]. Berlin: edition ost, 2002. 2 vols. 668pp. + 580pp. ISBN 3-360-01030-2. €29.90.

Tobias Hollitzer, ed., *Wie weiter mit der Aufarbeitung? 10 Jahre Stasi-Unterlagen-Gesetz: Bilanz und Ausblick* [How to Proceed with the Reappraisal? Ten Years of

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the Stasi Document Law: Balance Sheet and Prospects]. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2002. 158 pp. ISBN 3-374-02018-6. €12.80.

Alison Lewis, *Die Kunst des Verrats: Der Prenzlauer Berg und die Staatssicherheit* [The Art of Betrayal: Prenzlauer Berg and State Security]. Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2003. 272 pp. ISBN 3-8260-2487-7. €36.00.

Elisabeth Pfister, *Unternehmen Romeo: Die Liebeskommandos der Stasi* [Operation Romeo: The Stasi Love Commandos]. Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch, 1999. 208 pp. ISBN 3-7466-7033-0. €7.79.

Ingolf Pleil, *Mielke, Macht und Meisterschaft: Die "Bearbeitung" der Sportgemeinschaft Dynamo Dresden durch das MfS, 1978–1989* [Mielke, Power and Championship: The "Handling" of the Dynamo Dresden Team by the MfS, 1978–89]. Berlin: Ch. Links, 2001. 303 pp. ISBN 3-86153-235-2. €15.50.

Holger Richter, *Die Operative Psychologie des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit der DDR* [The Operative Psychology of the GDR Ministry of State Security]. Frankfurt am Main: Mabuse-Verlag, 2001. 357 pp. ISBN 3-933050-72-3. €32.00.

Matthias Wagner, *Das Stasi-Syndrom: Über den Umgang mit den Akten des MfS in den 90er Jahren* [The Stasi Syndrome: On Dealing with MfS Files in the 1990s]. Berlin: edition ost, 2001. 260 pp. ISBN 3-360-01021-3. €12.90.

One hundred seventy-eight kilometers of archival material. Personal files on six million individuals. Forty million index cards. One million pictures and negatives. Thousands of human scents stored in glass jars, 91,015 full-time employees, 174,000 "unofficial" informants. The highest surveillance rate (agents to population) in history. Husbands spying on wives. Colleagues snitching on co-workers. Informants posing as dissidents. State officials harboring Red Army Faction terrorists. "Romeo" agents preying on hapless secretaries. Commandos kidnapping alleged traitors from West Germany. Agent provocateurs infiltrating literary groups and church circles.

The East German Ministry of State Security (MfS), popularly known as the Stasi, has long had a reputation as one of the world's most ruthless, efficient, and omnipotent secret police. The MfS went to extraordinary lengths to protect the regime of the East German communist party, the Socialist Unity Party (SED). It had virtually all of society under surveillance. It facilitated and sometimes even manipulated East German economic, political, and cultural developments. It had a destructive effect on the lives and careers of many East Germans and some

West Germans. Even after its dissolution in 1990, the Stasi continued to exert influence: the institutionalized insidiousness that it had fostered poisoned the political culture of reunified Germany. But more than a decade of research has complicated the portrayal of the MfS. The Stasi, it turns out, was often surprisingly inefficient, ineffective, and even counterproductive. As scholars have learned, it performed numerous state functions, but its power remained circumscribed. It dispatched hordes of snoopers, but it often had great difficulty controlling its informants. It also maintained thousands of agents in West Germany, but it never fundamentally challenged the West German order. How, then, should we understand the Stasi and its significance for East German history?

There is now a huge literature on the Stasi. It includes thousands of monographs, general histories, articles, and journalistic accounts; and hundreds of memoirs by former victims, informants, and full-time employees of the Stasi. Despite the flood of publications, there are few overviews of the Stasi literature.¹ In the following pages, I discuss eleven recent works in the context of the most important debates surrounding the MfS: the function of the Stasi in the SED regime, the role of MfS employees, the collaboration of unofficial informants, the degree to which the MfS penetrated West Germany, and the political (mis)use of the Stasi files after 1989. In addition, I review the comparisons that are made between the Stasi and similar institutions in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and the post-1945 communist states of Eastern Europe. Finally, I also note the highly politicized nature of this work. Many authors have explicit political agendas: to restrict or provide access to the Stasi files, to justify or condemn individual past actions, and, most important, to defend or delegitimize East Germany. Given the continuing inaccessibility of the former KGB archives and the resulting paucity of literature on the Soviet secret police, the large Stasi historiography also holds special relevance for Soviet historians interested in understanding and comparing communist security agencies.

A “State within a State” or “Sword and Shield” of the Party?

Mielke-Konzern: Die Geschichte der Stasi, 1945–1990, by Jens Gieseke, provides an excellent introduction to the chronology, structure, and activities of the MfS. As Gieseke writes, the Stasi, founded in 1950, became an enormous operation that included a bewildering array of main administrations, departments, and other sections. Some of its units focused on the classic tasks of espionage: decoding secret communications, listening to foreign broadcasts, and establishing networks of agents abroad. But most Stasi activity was directed toward domestic

¹ See Roger Engelmann, “Forschungen zum Staatssicherheitsdienst der DDR—Tendenzen und Ergebnisse,” in *Spionage für den Frieden? Nachrichtendienste in Deutschland während des Kalten Krieges*, ed. Wolfgang Krieger and Jürgen Weber (Munich: Olzog, 1997), 181–212; and M. E. Sarotte, “Under Cover of Boredom: Recent Publications on the ‘Stasi,’ the East German Ministry for State Security,” *Intelligence and National Security* 12, 4 (1997): 196–210.

surveillance. At least two departments spied on the East German army and police forces. One focused on dissident and church groups, two on postal and telephone surveillance. Another section controlled the fulfillment of economic plans. The Stasi also maintained its own prison system, guards unit, academy, medical service, bank branch, and professional sports league. In addition, there were 15 provincial and 216 district MfS administrations. The Stasi's size and range of activities has raised important questions. What explains the extraordinary magnitude of the MfS? Was the Stasi a "state within a state"? Could it or did it exert its will over that of the SED leadership?

As Gieseke writes, one of the most salient features of the Stasi was its enormous expansion. In 1956, the MfS had some 16,000 employees, a figure in line with the Soviet Union and other East Central European countries (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 54). But in the next decades, the Stasi grew—and grew and grew. Why? In part, as Gieseke argues, the Stasi expanded because it took on various tasks performed in other states by the police, the army, or civil institutions. In East Germany, the Stasi made arrests and undertook criminal investigations, ran a prison system, carried out passport and border controls, and performed armed guard and other military duties. This wide range of formal duties, however, is still insufficient to explain the Stasi's outsized growth (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 101–4). Some historians, notably Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle in *Untergang auf Raten* (Decline in Installments), have argued that the MfS expanded in reaction to waves of regime opposition: the June Uprising in 1953, de-Stalinization in 1956, the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, and the Prague Spring in 1968.² But Gieseke favors another set of interpretations. As he shows, the Stasi's personnel did not grow in spurts after domestic crises, but rather continuously. The bulk of MfS expansion also took place between 1968 and 1982, *after* the regime had survived most of its major crises: while the ministry had some 20,000 employees in 1961 and 45,500 in 1971, it had 81,500 in 1982 (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 70). Moreover, the Stasi's greatest growth coincided with the era of détente. This has led some historians to link the ministry's expansion to improved East–West relations. Roger Engelmann, for example, argues that the SED leadership, fearing negative Western press reports, wished the MfS to hold back on overt forms of repression. The Stasi was to deploy more subtle methods such as observation and *Zersetzung* (subversion). These, however, involved more personnel—hence the MfS expansion (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 72).

The Stasi's growth pattern has led some historians to argue that the MfS came to exercise "a historically new form" of power. Besides carrying out the classic repressive functions of a secret police force, the Stasi came to exert "comprehensive concealed control and manipulation functions" (Gieseke,

²Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, *Untergang auf Raten: Unbekannte Kapitel der DDR-Geschichte* (Munich: Bertelsmann, 1993).

Mielke-Konzern, 71). The MfS, it is suggested, infiltrated all aspects of society so as to smooth over the pitfalls of dictatorship. In the absence of an independent public sphere, the MfS provided the SED leadership with information on the mood of the East German population.³ In the absence of market conditions, the MfS intervened to ensure the provision of supplies, parts, or other necessities that kept factories and other economic entities up and running. One historian has even labeled the MfS the “lubricant of society.”⁴ Summarizing this argument, another has written, “The MfS became more and more a socio-technological repair factory for a misguided system and went over from classic repression to a tendency toward a ‘preventative masked social steering.’”⁵ Historians have come up with a variety of terms for the Stasi’s multi-purpose role. Gieseke, for example, describes it as a “mixed-goods firm,” while Thomas Ammer labels it a “general purpose weapon in the ruling apparatus of the SED.”⁶

Given its size and range of functions, some observers have claimed that the Stasi was a “state within a state.” Klaus Bästlein, for example, in *Der Fall Mielke*, writes that the “MfS was a ‘state within a state’—with its own disciplinary rules, its own medical service, and even its own bank branch” (Bästlein, 84). These features, though, hardly constitute the core features of a state. Moreover, the Stasi did not have a monopoly on the use of force, Max Weber’s classic definition of a state. The notion of the Stasi as a “state within a state” is actually a straw man—and a political one at that. It arose in January 1990, when Egon Krenz—the SED’s last, brief, and by then ousted general secretary—used the phrase to distance himself from the much-hated Stasi (even though he had been the party secretary in charge of security matters from 1983 onward). Erich Honecker, the leader of the SED from 1971 to 1989, also claimed that the Stasi’s activities contradicted Politburo decrees, and that these could only be explained by saying “that, in accordance with the model of the Cheka, one had attempted to develop a state within a state” (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 92–93). Erich Mielke, the Stasi chief from 1957 to 1989, however, would have none of it. He insisted that the Stasi had been what it had always claimed to be: the “sword and shield” of the party. For Mielke, this was a point of honor; the Stasi was not to serve as the party’s scapegoat.

Most scholars agree with Mielke. Historians have not found instances in which Mielke subverted the SED leadership or its intentions. Moreover, Mielke *was* a top SED leader; his political influence was institutionalized within party

³Clemens Vollnhals, “Das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit: Ein Instrument totalitärer Herrschaftsausübung,” in *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, ed. Hartmut Kälble, Jürgen Kocka, and Hartmut Zwahr (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1994), 512.

⁴Clemens Vollnhals is quoted in Michael Schwartz, “MfS-Akten und Zeitgeschichtsforschung,” *Deutschland Archiv* 27, 5 (1994): 538.

⁵Schwartz, “MfS-Akten,” 538.

⁶Thomas Ammer, “DDR—SED—MfS: Die Unzertrennlichen,” *Deutschland Archiv* 30, 2 (1997): 296; and Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 17.

channels. As a member of the Politburo, he was able to ensure that the MfS had a voice in policy-making. While he undoubtedly expressed Stasi interests in party bodies, Mielke appears to have readily accepted the notion that the ministry was first and foremost the protector of the party's—and not its own—interests. In addition, Mielke appears to have fairly scrupulously adhered to the party's dictum that the Stasi not spy on full-time workers in the SED apparatus (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 101). In further arguments intended to refute the “state within a state” claim, historians point to the events of 1989. At that time, in the absence of strong guidance from the SED, the Stasi simply crumbled. This suggests that the Stasi was not only accustomed to taking its orders from the party, but that it also did not have an instinct to preserve itself independent of the SED regime.⁷ Given these arguments, Gieseke writes that the “sword and shield” interpretation is the “true crux” of the Stasi's actual power (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 101).

While “no state within a state,” the Stasi was a complex organization with a variety of ancillary institutions. One of these, the Juristische Hochschule (Juridical College or JHS), was an academy established to professionalize Stasi cadres. In *Die Operative Psychologie des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit der DDR*, Holger Richter, a psychologist, explores the Department of Operative Psychology at the JHS from its founding in 1965 onward. Altogether, about 10,000 Stasi officials took courses in operational psychology, while about 5 percent of all JHS graduates completed their degrees in the department (Richter, 5, 312). To research his study, Richter closely examined 211 *Diplom* (bachelor) and 23 doctoral theses written by Stasi employees on psychological matters (Richter, 11–12). He also looked at teaching materials and at the writings of the 16 academics who taught in the department. What did he find? Unsurprisingly, the Stasi was eager to have research on the ways in which psychology could be deployed against the “enemy.” In this, Richter notes, it was a most unusual kind of academic psychology: rather than helping people, it was bent on their destruction. Or, in the words of one academic that Richter interviewed, “it was our idea to examine social psychology very carefully and closely for its findings, and then to turn these inside out” (Richter, 213).

Richter quantifies all his material in countless charts and endless statistics. According to his numbers, most of the theses dealt with ways to manipulate either the “enemy” or unofficial informants (respectively, 29.4 percent and 22.3 percent of all studies), but a surprisingly large number addressed ways to motivate or otherwise improve the work performance of Stasi cadres (25.4 percent) (Richter, 312). Richter argues, however, that few of these writings were academic in any scientific sense. Most did not rely on empirical research, and

⁷ Walter Süß, “Politische Taktik und institutioneller Zerfall: MfS und SED in der Schlußphase des Regimes,” in *Staatspartei und Staatssicherheit: Zum Verhältnis von SED und MfS*, ed. Siegfried Suckut and Walter Süß (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1997), 269.

almost all ignored the Western psychological literature. Much of what passed as academic work was common-sense intuition wrapped up in pseudo-scientific jargon. For Richter, operational psychology was a bogus science in the service of a totalitarian regime. Unfortunately, Richter's research methodology precludes discussion of how and to what extent operational psychology research was actually utilized by the Stasi in its spying and other activities. Given its dubious scientific merit, probably few MfS officers relied on its supposed insights. In this connection, it should be noted that in contrast to the KGB, the Stasi never systematically misused psychiatry. As an important study by Sonja Süß has conclusively demonstrated, healthy East Germans were virtually never given psychiatric drugs or placed in psychiatric clinics.⁸

SV Dynamo, a professional sports league for East German security personnel, was also run out of Stasi headquarters. Mielke, who was chairman of SV Dynamo, was a passionate soccer fan, and particularly of the Dynamo Berlin (BFC) team. In *Mielke, Macht und Meisterschaft*, Ingolf Pleil, a journalist, documents the fortunes of Dynamo Dresden, a unit of the Volkspolizei (people's police) and Dynamo member, in 1978–89. Dynamo Dresden was the hottest East German soccer team in the mid-1970s, but its winning streak ended after it won the national championship for the third time in a row in 1978. Mielke was then said to have stated that “the capital city needs a champion” (Pleil, 11). BFC won the next ten national championships. In East Germany, there were long-term rumors to the effect that the Stasi undermined Dynamo Dresden. Most significantly, in 1981 the team dropped three star players under questionable circumstances. Pleil exhaustively researched this mystery. In the process, he documented how thoroughly Dynamo Dresden was infiltrated by the Stasi. Of 72 players, 18 worked (sometimes only briefly) as unofficial informants for the MfS; in addition, some of the team's coaches, trainers, and medical personnel reported to Stasi handlers (Pleil, 280).

Pleil shows that the Stasi's major concern was not athletic achievement but rather efforts to stop players from leaving East Germany while playing in the West. Since every departed athlete represented a great loss of prestige, the Stasi did all it could to prevent such occurrences. In 1981, when an unofficial informant claimed that he knew that players Gerd Weber, Peter Kotte, and Matthias Müller intended to leave, all three were not allowed to accompany the team on a trip abroad. Instead, they were interrogated at length and, in Weber's case, imprisoned for many months. None was ever allowed to play for Dynamo Dresden again. In the case of Kotte and Müller, no firm evidence ever surfaced that these players had actually planned to leave; both denied any such intentions. Dresden fans thus believed that the players had been framed by the Stasi—all to lessen Dynamo Dresden's chances of beating BFC. Pleil, however,

⁸ See Sonja Süß, *Politisch Mißbraucht? Psychiatrie und Staatssicherheit in der DDR* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1998).

found no smoking gun. He was unable to link Mielke or other top Stasi officials specifically to an attempt to undermine Dynamo Dresden. The episode suggests that East Germans sometimes attributed greater nefariousness to the MfS than was warranted—a measure of the Stasi's image, if not necessarily its reality, as an omnipotent, malfeasant institution.

The two books just discussed suggest a troubling trend in the Stasi literature. Researchers are now writing books on very narrow topics: one department of an academy, twelve years of a provincial soccer team. In both books, the author states just how much archival material he examined in the Stasi archives: Richter saw 40,000 pages on operational psychology, Pleil 23,000 pages on Dynamo Dresden (Richter, 5; Pleil, 279). But as any modern historian knows, these figures do not signify an extraordinary amount of examined material. The glut of archival information appears to have daunted scholars; and, in response, they now often cling to very small subjects. In turn, they feel unable or are otherwise reluctant to generalize their research findings. Indeed, it is striking that Richter and Pleil, as well as most of the authors of the other works under review, do not situate their research findings in broad discussions about the Stasi and its historical significance. The material presented in these books, however, lends weight to new interpretations about the MfS. The examination of operational psychology, for example, points to the often dilettantish nature of Stasi doings. The fact that Dynamo Dresden's downfall did not result from a well-executed MfS conspiracy suggests that the Stasi's power lay perhaps less in its actual performance and rather more in its mystique.

Stasi Officials: Criminal, Narrow-Minded, Impotent, or Honorable?

In the Stasi literature, MfS employees are portrayed as everything from crooks to men of good will. While some scholars aim to criminalize former Stasi officials, others merely characterize them as narrow-minded. Former full-time MfS employees, however, defend themselves and the institution they served. Historians have asked a host of questions concerning MfS personnel. Who was Erich Mielke? Who peopled his Stasi world? What did Stasi agents do? And how do they justify their past actions?

Klaus Bästlein's *Der Fall Mielke* is both a biography of the Stasi chief and a catalogue of his alleged crimes. Bästlein's work was written under the auspices of the Berlin Senate Administration of Justice, the government agency responsible for prosecuting Mielke for his alleged crimes. This prosecution proved an utter failure. While state prosecutors were able to have Mielke convicted for the 1931 murder of a Berlin policeman, they were unable to have him tried for any crimes associated with the Stasi; by the time these cases were ready, Mielke was deemed too ill to stand trial. The Berlin senator for justice, Wolfgang Wieland, nonetheless wrote in the book's foreword, "despite the unsatisfactory results of the Mielke case, the public prosecutor's office [no.] II achieved good work in the pursuit of wrongs committed by state institutions of the former East Germany." In lieu of

a conviction, Bästlein was hired to popularize the office's findings. Not only was this publication to further delegitimize the SED regime, but it was also to justify the judicial pursuit of some former East German office holders. As Wieland continued, the "good work" of the prosecutor's office "has convincingly refuted the oft-repeated assertion that 'revenge, the right of victors, or colonial justice' have been exercised" (foreword to Bästlein, 10). The damning evidence presented in the volume was intended to allay any doubts concerning the propriety of the judicial prosecution of former East Germans after reunification.

Der Fall Mielke is divided into two parts. In the first, Bästlein relates Mielke's biography. This is a cautious work. As Bästlein himself states, "sensations are not offered" (Bästlein, 13). While adding little to the historical record, Bästlein judiciously summarizes the known facts of Mielke's life. Born in 1907, Mielke joined the German Communist Party (KPD) in 1927. Four years later, he was involved in one of the great scandals of the Weimar era: after a series of provocations between police and the KPD, Mielke and an accomplice shot and killed a Berlin policeman (for which Mielke received a six-year sentence in 1993). The KPD whisked Mielke off to Moscow, where he became a student of revolution at the Lenin School. During this time in the Soviet Union, Mielke appears to have already had contacts with Soviet security agencies. From 1937 to 1939, Mielke was in Spain; rather than fighting, though, he apparently ferreted out "anarchists" and "Trotskyists" from the ranks of the International Brigades. Mielke then spent World War II in France. Unlike most KPD cadres there, he did not engage in anti-Nazi resistance activity. Instead, he was interned and then employed by the Vichy work service. In 1944, he was transferred to the Todt Organization, a Nazi labor organization. In East Germany, Mielke's official biography stated that he had fought on the side of Soviet forces against Nazi Germany. But in fact, as post-1989 research has proven, Mielke's wartime life was rather less glorious: not only was he relegated to revolutionary impotence in French internment camps, but he also—if unwillingly—worked for fascist labor organizations (Bästlein, 22–26).

In 1945, Mielke made his way to Berlin. He soon headed the KPD's Department of Police and Justice and, in this position, won the trust of Walter Ulbricht, the most powerful SED leader from 1945 to 1971. In the period that followed, Mielke worked to establish East Germany's security operations, including the Kommissariat 5 (K 5), the political police. The K 5 is generally viewed as the precursor to the Stasi. Mielke, however, was not named MfS chief until 1957, because Soviet authorities were suspicious of his wartime credentials. During the Ulbricht years, Mielke steadily expanded the MfS's size and range of activities. But he came to enjoy particular influence only after Erich Honecker became first secretary of the SED in 1971. In that year, Mielke became a candidate member and, in 1976, a full member of the Politburo. He also enjoyed one-on-one meetings with Honecker immediately after the regular Tuesday Politburo meetings. Bästlein's biography suggests that Mielke was arrogant and

authoritarian as MfS Minister. But the Stasi chief was not unusually sadistic or corrupt, and he did not lead an excessively lavish or otherwise profligate lifestyle. Bästlein observes that beyond the Stalinist proclivities shared by many KPD veterans, there was nothing in Mielke's psychological or other makeup that explains why he in particular came to head one of the most feared and omnipresent security forces. Bästlein concludes that "the long life of the Stasi chief stands for that 'banality of evil' that especially shaped the 20th century" (Bästlein, 103).

In the second half of his work, Bästlein documents 30 of Mielke's alleged crimes—a veritable catalogue of Stasi wrongdoing. In the early 1950s, Mielke was involved with the torture and imprisonment of a few West German communist officials and numerous East German functionaries; all were innocent of their alleged crimes. Bästlein also details the Stasi kidnapping of several lawyers active in the so-called Investigating Committee of Free Jurists, an organization that documented East German legal abuses. Two lost their lives in Soviet or Stasi custody. In 1955, the Stasi drugged, kidnapped, tried, and imprisoned Karl Wilhelm Fricke, at the time a young journalist known for his writings on East Germany; he later became the leading Western expert on the Stasi. Bästlein further describes cases in which the MfS kidnapped and then imprisoned or even executed former Stasi or other security personnel who had fled to the West. The MfS also arrested and sometimes executed its own officers for corrupt activity. And Bästlein notes the case of one Gottfried Strympe, guilty of 64 petty thefts as well as of setting 28 fires after he was unable to find and watch women undressing in front of their windows. Strympe, who seems to have been psychologically disturbed, was executed after the Stasi claimed that he had committed his actions on behalf of Western secret services.

Bästlein also indicts Mielke and the Stasi for protecting a criminal SED regime. When, for example, dissidents tried to prove that the SED had engaged in electoral fraud in local elections in May 1989, the MfS covered up for the party and obstructed the dissidents' investigatory efforts. The Stasi aided SED leaders in their misuse of political office for personal gain. The MfS was responsible for supplying and guarding Wandlitz, the exclusive settlement where SED Politburo members and their families lived. According to Bästlein, between 1980 and 1989 the Stasi supplied Western food, clothing, jewelry, electronic equipment, and other luxury goods to the tune of some 60 million West German marks to Wandlitz residents (Bästlein, 240). In addition, the Stasi maintained luxurious villas for individual Politburo members and the Wolletz hunting lodge for Mielke and other high-ranking Stasi officers. Finally, Bästlein documents how the Stasi arranged for ten West German terrorists, who belonged to the Red Army Faction, to come and live in East Germany. After 1990, the fact that the SED regime had harbored these terrorists was counted as among the most surprising of the Stasi revelations.

These 30 cases make for some hair-raising reading. They certainly portray a security service that perpetrated numerous human rights abuses. But Bästlein has not made clear what these cases actually demonstrate. Is it Mielke's crimes? If so, it is problematic in that Mielke has not been directly linked to most of the cases; investigations of Mielke's complicity were halted after he was declared unfit to stand trial. Is it the breadth and depth of Stasi crimes? If so, Bästlein has not stated whether individual cases are examples of much broader phenomena, or the only known cases of the sort described. Gieseke, for example, states that 100 active and 356 former MfS employees fled to West Germany, that 108 of these were returned to East Germany (generally against their will), and that 7 were executed (Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter*, 206–7). But from Bästlein's work, one would never know the dimension of a phenomenon documented in three individual cases. In addition, some of the Stasi's most egregious wrongs were not crimes in a legal sense. Bästlein thus does not address some of the most disturbing Stasi activities, including the ubiquity of unofficial informants or the MfS's attempts to "subvert" individuals and their relationships. Bästlein's work shows that historical investigations connected to legal proceedings can illuminate only some—and certainly not the most insidious—aspects of MfS wrongdoing.

Mielke's enormous staff is the subject of another excellent work by Jens Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter der Staatssicherheit*. From the start, Gieseke shows, the MfS was headed by veteran Communists who lived revolution before 1945. Of the top 27 men who initially ran the Stasi, all but 2 had joined the KPD or its youth organization before 1933 (Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter*, 96). Longtime Communists, however, were relatively few and far between in East Germany; the MfS never had more than 1,500 Old Communists on its payroll (Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter*, 121). Although the Stasi might have recruited former Nazi security personnel, it did not do so. Instead, in a true break with German police tradition, the Stasi recruited from the working class. This meant, however, that many MfS employees were uneducated and initially, at least, quite incompetent. In turn, veteran Communists had little difficulty in imparting their Stalinist ethos to Stasi recruits. At the same time, the MfS offered its employees considerable social mobility. Stasi officers thus came to see themselves as a revolutionary avant-garde protecting East Germany from sabotage and destruction. It was a decidedly masculine avant-garde. While 25 percent of Stasi employees were women in 1954, this percentage dropped to 16.3 percent in 1965 and stagnated thereafter; in 1989, women made up just 15.7 percent of MfS employees (Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter*, 267, 432).

Much of Gieseke's work documents how MfS recruitment patterns led to the reproduction of a narrow-minded Stasi worldview. The MfS always preferred to hire politically reliable rather than intellectually talented employees. In comparison with other East German bureaucracies, the MfS had significantly lower rates of workers with an *Abitur* (the high-school final examination that

qualifies individuals for university study); this helped ensure that the MfS never became a hotbed of reform ideas (Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter*, 331). As a security precaution, the Stasi also refused to hire individuals with close relatives in West Germany; this, however, starkly limited the pool of East Germans from which it could recruit. In a fascinating discussion of kinship patterns among individuals hired between 1968 and 1982, Gieseke shows that 17.2 percent had a father working for the MfS, and roughly half had some other close relative working for the Stasi. Moreover, some 57.7 percent of Stasi employees were recruited from the so-called socialist service class—families in which one or both parents worked for the party or state bureaucracies (including the MfS) (Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter*, 334–35). The SED political elite also favored the Stasi as a workplace for its offspring. In 1986, among the 26 members and candidates of the Politburo, 8 had one or more children working for the Stasi, and among the 222 members and candidates of the Central Committee, 51 had family members employed by the MfS (Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter*, 422). Gieseke amasses all these figures to make a crucial point: through its recruitment policies, the Stasi became something of an encapsulated world, increasingly isolated from society. It should be noted, though, that many Stasi officials were actually very well informed about the mood of the East German population; this was, after all, their job. Gieseke is also somewhat circumspect about the significance of his findings. Did the MfS adopt its more bizarre methods because it was removed from East German society?

While Gieseke does a superb job of documenting the sociological attributes of MfS employees, his work says little about how Stasi officials actually spent their days. For insight into this matter, it is useful to turn to the copious memoir literature of former MfS officials. Although *Ende der Schweigepflicht* is defensive in tone, this memoir by Manfred Bols is a cut above similar works, many of which have been issued by the same publisher, edition ost. Unlike most ex-Stasi officials, Bols is somewhat self-critical about his past actions. He even claims that “from where I stand today, I would not travel this path again, and I feel a mild regret about my decision [to join the Stasi] in those days” (Bols, 7). Born in 1941, Bols was of middle-class origin and completed a university degree. In his youth, Bols believed in socialism, not least because it had given him excellent educational and other opportunities: “I personally ... was given all development opportunities; the state supported my development in many ways” (Bols, 51). But when Bols joined the Leipzig MfS in 1966 he did so not only out of conviction but also for material gain. As a Stasi official he would earn more than if he taught Marxism-Leninism (his university training) and, within six months, he would receive a two-room apartment with kitchen and bath.

Bols was to foster espionage efforts in West Germany. The MfS went to enormous lengths to set up such spying operations; but, according to Bols, these seldom bore fruit. This narrative reads as a series of failures: agents inadvertently blew their alibis, informants suffered from personal weaknesses, targeted

individuals were poorly chosen, and so on. As Bols writes, “in my experience, the time and financial expenditure were not commensurate with the results” (Bols, 110). The highpoint of Bols’s Stasi career came in the early 1980s, when he was stationed in Tanzania. One can only wonder what Mielke or other SED leaders hoped to gain from spying operations in Africa. In any event, Bols had little success: he did not infiltrate the West German embassy in Dar es Salaam, he did not recruit West German or other foreign informants, and he did not forge important links to African insurgency movements. Bols returned to Leipzig in 1985, and it was there that he experienced the revolution. He writes that “between September and December 1989 we waited passively in our offices for decisions of the party and state leadership, for guidelines and orders” (Bols, 224). Endless spying failures, a hopeless task in Tanzania, the passive waiting for orders: Bols’s Stasi was an ineffective and impotent colossus. Bols thus appears to have wasted 23 years of his life not on a repressive institution but on an incompetent agency. This, of course, is intended to absolve him of wrongdoing. Interestingly, though, it also bears out the new view of the Stasi as not ruthlessly capable but surprisingly ineffectual.

Another edition of ost publication, *Die Sicherheit*, presents a cranky, defensive diatribe against current Stasi research and its negative image of the MfS. Written by 20 former Stasi officials, this two-volume, 1,248-page work is the longest but least informative of the books under review. The authors display their still-healthy propensity for conspiracy theory. They suggest that “apparently for the public the MfS/AfNS [the successor to the Stasi] must still be portrayed as the enemy, because the de-legitimation of the GDR [East Germany] in the consciousness of the citizens of the new federal states has not made the hoped-for progress. It also distracts people from the disadvantages of real capitalism and the problems that it poses.” The authors justify MfS actions by arguing that “the fact is that most citizens of East Germany felt themselves secure.” Moreover, they insist, “objectivity in judging the MfS/AfNS means to recognize that its employees achieved a contribution to peace and to the international policy of détente. That they prevented or investigated serious crimes, and that they were involved in the legal prosecution of those who had committed Nazi and war crimes” (*Die Sicherheit*, 35–36). The authors cling to the language and arguments of the old East German version of history: “Given the efforts of the enemy, with regard to the security of its state and social development and the protection of its political and social achievements, the GDR had every reason to be extremely vigilant” (*Die Sicherheit*, 71). With many tendentious arguments and misleading comparisons to Western security agencies, the authors portray the Stasi as a well-meaning organization that worked hard both to foster world peace and to protect East German citizens. While *Die Sicherheit* covers many aspects of MfS history, it offers little in the way of new or otherwise useful information. It does, however, show the persistence of the MfS mentality—a dozen years after the Stasi’s dissolution.

Unofficial Informants: A Country of Collaborators?

Of all the revelations concerning the Stasi, none aroused more public outrage than the huge number of so-called unofficial informants (IMs). In 1989, there were approximately 174,000 IMs—one for every 80 to 160 East Germans (the precise ratio depended on geographical district) (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 114). Among IMs, there was a fluctuation rate of about ten percent per year and so, as one historian has determined, upward of a quarter-million East Germans had snitched on their fellow citizens in the second half of the 1980s alone.⁹ Some 85–90 percent of all IMs were men (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 113). In addition, while at any one time somewhat over one percent of the East German population was engaged in IM activity, probably more than ten percent of the adult “intellectual” population collaborated with the Stasi.¹⁰ To many observers, the fact that so many well-educated male East Germans had snooped on colleagues, neighbors, friends, and relatives suggested the true depravity of the SED regime. IMs had placed fellow citizens at the mercy of a strong, repressive state. They had made possible the regime’s assault on privacy, honesty, and truth. And they had betrayed the elemental trust that allows meaningful human interaction. The presence of so many IMs in East Germany has been at the center of much popular and scholarly debate. How did the Stasi manage to win over so many informants? What did the MfS accomplish with its IMs? Did the ubiquity of IMs mean that the Stasi not only observed but actually manipulated society?

Alison Lewis, an Australian literary scholar, answers many of these questions in *Die Kunst des Verrats*. This is a highly intelligent analysis of the Stasi’s penetration of an underground literary scene centered in the East Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg. At its height in the early 1980s, this scene was viewed as an exciting, independent underground culture. After 1989, however, it was revealed that two of its most important movers and shakers, Sascha Anderson and Rainer Schedlinski, had worked all along as Stasi informants. This, in turn, challenged the movement’s legendary reputation; critics argued that the presence of the MfS belied the movement’s authenticity.

According to a 1979 set of ministry guidelines, IMs were to play an important role in the Stasi’s policy of “subversion.” Within “hostile groups,” for example, IMs were to exploit quarrels and differences of opinion in order to “fragment,” “lame,” “disorganize,” and “isolate” their individuals. In this way, “actions ... [of such persons] ... would be prevented, fundamentally reduced, or completely stopped” (Lewis, 47). As Lewis discovered, the MfS did not win over Anderson and Schedlinski *after* these individuals had become underground figures. Instead, the Stasi actually set up both men to penetrate the dissident milieu. Of the two, Anderson was clearly the more creative and charismatic. Lewis describes him as a

⁹Engelmann, “Forschungen,” 196.

¹⁰Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 47.

psychological conundrum; ever restless, in need of both security and adventure, Anderson thrived on playing with a very complex identity. In the early 1980s, he was at the center of East German literary dissidence: he organized illicit readings, founded underground publications, mentored young authors, and even published his own writings in the West. All along, however, he passed on great quantities of information to the MfS. The Stasi was thus able to carry out house searches, install bugging systems, confiscate illegal literature, and prevent planned events (Lewis, 111). Moreover, Anderson helped shape dissident culture to the Stasi's liking. At readings, for example, he prevented political discussion by channeling questions toward aesthetics or other less overtly political topics. He also had some success in stalling writers' attempts to publish works in the West. Anderson nonetheless posed many problems for the Stasi. To be a useful informant, he had to appear as a credible dissident. But Anderson was much more than just a simulating dissident. His boundless energy fostered the very vibrant cultural underground that the MfS hoped to prevent.

Did the Stasi shape the aesthetics of the literary scene? The Prenzlauer Berg authors were known for seemingly apolitical writings. Some critics have questioned whether this was due to Stasi influence. Lewis analyzes this issue with great subtlety. As she argues, many younger East German writers had come to believe that the best way to resist the SED regime was through a critique of language. Drawing both on French postmodernism and their own dissatisfaction with real existing socialism, these writers believed that the production of an unstable, subversive language could undermine a social order based on conventional notions of progress (Lewis, 28–29). They thus came up with a style of writing that was both abstract and difficult. This material was then published in underground journals, including some financed by the Stasi. Schedlinski, for example, founded and edited *Ariadnefabrik* (Ariadne Factory) with MfS support. Lewis nonetheless argues that this kind of writing was neither invented by the Stasi nor produced on its orders; she found little evidence to suggest that the MfS had actually directed Prenzlauer Berg artistic production. *Die Kunst des Verrats* reiterates the notion that the Stasi was hardly all-powerful. The MfS not only failed to eradicate the dissident literary movement, but its actions arguably strengthened it. The Stasi also had little influence on the aesthetics of the Prenzlauer Berg scene. The MfS was nonetheless ever present; and although Lewis does not address the issue much, it made the lives of many dissident writers most unpleasant.

Why did Anderson and Schedlinski become unofficial informants? Scholars have shown that a variety of motivations led individuals to collaborate with the Stasi. In some of the more startling cases of IM activity, psychological reasons seem to have played an important role. Anderson, for example, had an oversized ego that could not be satisfied by the limited opportunities that East German society offered. He seemingly found psychological satisfaction only through maintaining a contradictory double personality. Along with many other dissident informants, Anderson later argued that his Stasi connections had

allowed him to positively influence the SED regime on cultural and other policy matters. But Anderson and others seem to have hopelessly exaggerated their own importance; the Stasi's extensive interaction with dissident informants does not appear to have altered SED policy.

Despite their notoriety, dissident informants made up a small minority of IMs. Most unofficial informants cooperated with the Stasi out of political conviction (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 124). For many committed socialists, Stasi collaboration posed few dilemmas; these individuals believed that they were advancing the good socialist cause by reporting on those around them. Some IMs, however, worked for the Stasi for more prosaic reasons: to earn some extra cash, to avoid career setbacks, or to ensure future travel to the West. The Stasi was also known to prey on human weakness: in return for silence about some wrongdoing—financial, adulterous, or otherwise—the MfS would demand IM activity. Finally, fear undoubtedly motivated some Stasi collaboration. Unsure of the consequences of saying no, many individuals agreed to report on those around them. In this connection, Pleil found that a number of Dynamo Dresden players were tapped by the MfS to report on their teammates, agreed to do so, but then found the task distasteful. When they refused to cooperate any further with the Stasi, however, they suffered no professional or other consequences. Pleil also determined that no less talented player ever kept his place on the team because of Stasi collaboration; IMs were just as likely to be relegated to Dynamo farm teams as non-informants (Pleil, 280, 128). In short, it was surprisingly easy to stop IM activity, and informants did not enjoy undue privileges. Why, then, did so many East Germans continue to collaborate with the MfS? It seems that most simply routinized their Stasi activity; it became a normal part of their everyday lives. This, perhaps, is the most disturbing feature of the Stasi. Too many East Germans were led to engage in activities about which they should have had moral qualms.

How effective were unofficial informants in advancing the Stasi's goals? As Helmut Müller-Enbergs has shown, the Stasi often had great difficulties with its IMs. Although it recruited many SED members for IM activity, these individuals were known to be party members, and so were of little use in infiltrating the "enemy." The Stasi managed to recruit large numbers of other East German citizens, but these often passed on information with little or no operational value. Many IMs were either poor snoopers or were not in a position to provide the Stasi with useful information. In addition, for a variety of reasons, IMs often ceased their snitching; the MfS thus contended with high IM fluctuation rates.¹¹ For the Stasi, then, its large numbers of unofficial informants proved a mixed blessing.

¹¹ See Helmut Müller-Enbergs, *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit: Richtlinien und Durchführungsbestimmungen* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1996).

Espionage Abroad: West Germany in the Grip of the Stasi?

During the course of its history, the Stasi placed some 20,000 to 30,000 agents in West Germany.¹² Before the Berlin Wall was built in 1961, it could easily slip agents posing as political refugees into the Federal Republic. Many agents spent years, even decades, posing as loyal West German citizens. The Stasi thus infiltrated political parties, state agencies, major companies, and universities. The high number of spies has led scholars to question whether the Stasi somehow shaped West German history. Put more provocatively, did the Stasi have the Federal Republic not only in its purview but also in its grip?

From 1953 to 1986, Markus Wolf ran the Main Administration Reconnaissance (HV A), the Stasi's foreign espionage operations. Wolf was long something of a legend. He reputedly served as the model for John Le Carré's 1963 *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. Until 1979, he was known as the "man without a face," because his appearance was not known in the West; in that year, however, he was identified by Werner Stiller, one of the very few high-ranking MfS officials who ever defected. Under Wolf's leadership, the HV A not only infiltrated countless West German institutions but also tried to manipulate events in the Federal Republic. In the early 1960s, for example, Stasi agents set off a wave of antisemitic graffiti that was intended to de-legitimize West Germany as a bastion of Nazi sentiment.¹³ The Stasi also researched and publicized the Nazi pasts of many prominent West German citizens. This has led one historian, Götz Aly, to question whether the Stasi may be credited with initiating debates that eventually led the Federal Republic to face up to its Nazi past.¹⁴ In the 1970s, the Stasi also had a hand in changing the course of West German history. In 1972, Chancellor Willy Brandt faced a parliamentary vote of no confidence because of conservative opposition to his *Ostpolitik* (Eastern policy). At this time, the SED leadership apparently feared that Brandt's fall might jeopardize détente. The Stasi, it has been learned, bribed a conservative deputy, Julius Steiner, not to vote against Brandt; this was just one of two votes that kept the chancellor in office. In 1974, however, Brandt resigned his position after it became known that a close aide, Günter Guillaume, was a longtime MfS spy. For the Stasi, nothing failed like success.

The MfS, however, also saw some spectacular spying coups. Not a few of these were due to the "Romeo" method, the subject of *Unternehmen Romeo*. In this page-turner, Elisabeth Pfister, a journalist, writes about West German secretaries who were seduced by male Stasi agents and then convinced to spy for their lovers; at least 36 such cases are known (Pfister, 29). Pfister tells the stories of three Romeo victims in great detail. More often than not, these stories read

¹² Hubertus Knabe, *Die unterwanderte Republik: Stasi im Westen* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1999), 10.

¹³ Lothar Mertens, "'Westdeutscher' Antisemitismus? MfS-Dokumente über eine Geheimaktion in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland," *Deutschland Archiv* 27, 12 (1994): 1271–73.

¹⁴ Rahel Frank, "Stasi im Westen: Eine Tagung der BStU," *Deutschland Archiv* 35, 1 (2002): 123.

stranger than fiction. In 1964, for example, Gerda O. went to Paris to learn French. While there, she fell in love with a fellow language student, Herbert Schröter. A Stasi agent, Schröter had taken the course with just one aim in mind: to charm West German women who might work as foreign-language secretaries and spy for East Germany. He had remarkable success: he seduced Gerda, the couple moved to Bonn, and she got a job in the Foreign Ministry. Gerda was soon celebrated as a top spy in East Berlin. By 1973, however, her ardor for Schröter had waned, and she had come to question her actions. Alone among Romeo victims, she actually turned herself in to West German authorities—but not before she tipped off Schröter, who quickly fled to East Germany. Just three months later, Schröter seduced another West German woman, Karin S. A single mother abandoned by her husband, Karin went to Bulgaria for a vacation on the advice of a supposed friend, a Stasi agent. While there, she fell for Schröter, who convinced her, too, to spy for East Germany. In time, Karin found a job in the West German chancellor's office. Even though her Stasi work ultimately forced her to give up custody of her daughter to her former husband, Karin would do anything for her beloved Herbert. She regularly went to East Berlin, where she spent romantic weekends with Schröter in a luxurious villa maintained by the Stasi. The MfS even staged a wedding that matched all her desires—but was never officially registered. Spurred on by vague promises that she could soon move to East Berlin, Karin continued to pass on information about the chancellor's office. In 1977, she was unmasked, arrested, and imprisoned.

Karin S. was the typical Romeo victim: lonely and apolitical, she spied for love and love alone. When such women discovered the true nature of their lovers, their emotional lives fell apart. They also faced the full brunt of the law. While the Federal Constitutional Court ruled in 1995 that former East Germans could not generally be charged with treason, Romeo victims do not enjoy the same immunity. Adding insult to injury, in accordance with German law, they must pay for travel and other expenses incurred when their former lovers testify against them in court. In assessing responsibility for these women's ruined lives, Pfister points to Markus Wolf and his interest in Romeo matters; the Stasi certainly spared no care or expense in these affairs. Pfister, however, is also critical of what she views as a patriarchal West German society that left women feeling vulnerable, dependent, and looking for strong men—the perfect environment in which the Romeo method could be successful (Pfister, 25–26). Finally, despite her sympathy for the women, Pfister does not let them off easily. As she writes, many were quite intelligent, “but they accepted from their beloved men even the dumbest packs of lies so as not to endanger their own life happiness.... With tremendous energy they cleared the path of everything that might endanger this happiness: doubt, mistrust, responsibility, their own self-confidence” (Pfister, 199). *Unternehmen Romeo* shows the Stasi in all its perfidy: in its relentless pursuit of information, the MfS thought nothing of toying with the fragile identities of very vulnerable women.

How successful were MfS operations in West Germany? In 1989, there were somewhat more than 3,000 MfS informants active there.¹⁵ Gabriele Gast, for example, a Romeo case, was deputy director of Soviet analysis in the BND, West Germany's intelligence agency. Not only did she pass on valuable material to her Stasi handlers, but she was also in a position to shape official West German perceptions of the Soviet bloc: as part of her job, she prepared weekly reports for the chancellor on the situation in Eastern Europe (Pfister, 195). In another notorious case, Dieter Feuerstein, the son of MfS agents, trained as an engineer so that he could spy for East Germany. By the mid-1980s, he was working in the research department of Messerschmitt-Bölkow-Blohm. He passed on construction plans for tanks, helicopters, and Tornado and Jäger 90 fighter planes (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 213). Despite the ubiquity of Stasi spies, historians have questioned their effectiveness. Unlike Gast and Feuerstein, most informants were not in positions to provide particularly valuable material, and even fewer to influence important political or other decisions. In addition, gathering data is just part of the job of espionage; so, too, is effectively using the collected information. As a number of scholars have argued, the MfS secured valuable technical material, but the East German scientific community proved unable to make good use of the data.¹⁶ The same may well be true for political and other information that spies passed on to the Stasi.

Comparative Dictatorship: The Minimization of Stasi Crimes?

Historians have used Stasi material to make comparisons between East Germany, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and the post-1945 states of Eastern Europe. These comparisons (except those with the postwar states) tend to minimize Stasi crimes. This is the result both of the regimes compared and of the questions that scholars ask. Did the Stasi contribute to making East Germany a totalitarian regime? How, in terms of repression, did the MfS compare with other 20th-century security agencies? What do comparative analyses of denunciation suggest about the Stasi and East Germany?

Since reunification, totalitarianism theory has enjoyed a renaissance in Germany. East Germany, it is argued, had all the classic characteristics of a totalitarian regime: a one-party system, a command economy, an all-encompassing ideology, and, not least, a terroristic secret police. It also fulfilled what one historian of the Stasi, Clemens Vollnhals, labels the defining feature of totalitarian systems: "a rigorously carried-out primacy of politics, monopolized by the ruling party's claim to political *and* ideological leadership." Vollnhals further notes that totalitarian regimes ensure that "beyond private niches, the direct party-state grip on all areas of life tolerates no independent autonomy

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 122–25.

of the economy, culture, or society.”¹⁷ The Stasi’s omnipresence is often put forward as the strongest evidence that East Germany was totalitarian.¹⁸ But it is problematic to label it so; the term conjures up the most evil regimes of 20th-century Europe, and particularly Nazi Germany. Indeed, by categorizing East Germany as totalitarian, anti-communist scholars try to demonize it by linking it to Nazi Germany. But putting these two regimes on a par is very misleading. In contrast to Nazi Germany, East Germany was not genocidal. To date, for example, scholars have found that 208 East Germans were executed for political crimes, a number that pales in comparison with Nazi figures.¹⁹ Moreover, as is often noted, Nazi Germany left behind mountains of corpses, East Germany mountains of files. This, too, points to a world of difference between the regimes. In the current political climate, labeling East Germany totalitarian is tendentious. Perhaps for this reason, none of the books under review—despite their focus on the Stasi—argues that East Germany was totalitarian. Even Vollnhals concludes that the Stasi was a “ruling instrument of a ‘gentle’ totalitarianism”—a phrase that surely undermines the notion that East Germany was totalitarian.²⁰

The totalitarian model aside, historians have frequently compared the Stasi and the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police. The Gestapo had 7,000 employees in 1937, and 31,000 in 1944; the latter figure includes Gestapo personnel in Germany as well as in all Nazi-occupied territories. These numbers, of course, are much smaller than comparable Stasi figures; moreover, the East German population was tiny in comparison to that of all of Nazi-occupied Europe. Why was the Stasi so much larger than the Gestapo? For one, it was the only East German institution that specialized in state persecution; by contrast, the Gestapo was part of a much larger Nazi terror machine (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 106). In addition, as discussed more fully below, the MfS, unlike the Gestapo, could not rely on spontaneous denunciation; it thus required large numbers of employees to handle its many IMs. Furthermore, while the Gestapo remained fixated on repression, the MfS came to perform many other state functions. That said, however, the high numbers of MfS employees still demand explanation. At the very least, they point to the SED regime’s perceived vulnerability and general unpopularity. In addition, it is clear that East Germans were subject to a much more pervasive surveillance than the inhabitants of Nazi Germany. The Nazi regime was more brutal, but the SED regime was more insidious.

How did the Stasi compare with security agencies of other communist dictatorships? In contrast to the Soviet GPU-NKVD of the Stalin era, the Stasi

¹⁷Vollnhals, “Das Ministerium,” 498. Ital. in orig.

¹⁸Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London: Arnold, 2002), 21.

¹⁹Karl Wilhelm Fricke, “Bedrückende MfS-Erforschung,” *Deutschland Archiv* 33, 6 (2000): 1026.

²⁰Vollnhals, “Das Ministerium,” 514.

appears almost benign. In East Germany, there was no Great Terror, no vast GULAG, and no mass repressions of nationalist partisan movements. But the Stasi was the child of the Soviet secret police. Mielke and other leading Stasi officials had worked with Soviet security agencies before 1945. In addition, the MfS was created and developed under Soviet security auspices. In the early 1950s, some 2,200 Soviet agents were detailed to East Germany; by 1958, however, all but 32 KGB officers had left the country (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 58). Despite the later paucity of KGB agents, many of the Stasi's salient features imitated Soviet practice. Like its Soviet counterpart, the Stasi subordinated itself to the ruling communist party; maintained a very large network of secret informers; and, in addition to its repressive tasks, carried out various economic and state control functions.²¹ As Gieseke notes, of all the communist security agencies, the Stasi "was structurally most similar to the KGB, which was for many organizational questions the model for East German state security" (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 104).

Historians frequently note that the Stasi files are important because similar archival materials are generally unavailable in Eastern Europe; they have even suggested that Stasi documents be translated so that East European readers might better acquaint themselves with communist security agencies.²² Given the archival situation, little comparative work has been done on post-1945 security agencies in the Soviet bloc. Historians have determined, though, that the Stasi had a much higher ratio of employees to population than any other East European security agency: it had an astonishing 1 employee for every 180 East German citizens. By contrast, the Soviet KGB had 1 employee for every 595 Soviet citizens, the Czechoslovak StB 1 for every 867 citizens, and the Polish SB 1 for every 1,574 citizens (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 70). Scholars have not adequately explained why the Stasi was so exceptional in terms of the high numbers of its personnel. Was it Mielke's paranoia? A German propensity for thoroughness? Did the SED leadership feel particularly vulnerable because East Germany was part of a divided country? Or does some other factor explain this Stasi peculiarity?

In recent years, scholars have made much of the comparative study of denunciatory practices.²³ This is a wide-ranging area of historical inquiry, and not all of it is relevant to the Stasi. As many historians have noted, denunciation relies on the cooperation of a population. In regimes that are popular, the secret police can use spontaneous denunciations to aid its work. Gieseke writes that it

²¹These Soviet characteristics are discussed in various essays in the special issue "La police politique en Union soviétique, 1918–1953," *Cahiers du monde russe* 42, 2–3–4 (2001).

²²Ammer, "DDR—SED—MfS," 298–99.

²³See the special issue "Practices of Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789–1989," *Journal of Modern History* 68, 4 (1996); and Gerhard Sälder, "Denunziation—Staatliche Verfolgungspraxis und Anzeigeverhalten der Bevölkerung," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 47, 2 (1999): 153–65.

is now estimated that in Nazi Germany roughly 5–10 percent of the population was willing to denounce fellow citizens—a significant help to the Nazis in their persecution of supposed enemies. By contrast, the SED regime was generally unpopular, and so MfS officials received relatively few spontaneous denunciations. As a result, the Stasi formalized denunciation through the creation of a vast network of unofficial informants (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 116–19). Although costly in terms of MfS infrastructure, the system had some benefits: fewer false accusations needed to be investigated, and the Stasi could better control the kinds of information it received.²⁴

In its use of such a large network of secret informants, the MfS was surely imitating Soviet practice. A historian of Ukraine, Volodymyr Semystiaha, writes that “from the first days of its existence, the Cheka began to put in place a network of secret informers, which gradually came to encompass all strata of society without exception.” Semystiaha adds: “The number of secret informers in the Donbass in the latter half of the 1930s began to be taken to an absurd degree. They were present in practically all civic organizations, institutions, and branches of industry, transport, and agriculture.”²⁵ This sounds rather like the Stasi in its last decades. Semystiaha’s article, however, also suggests that at least during Stalin’s time, secret informants were treated quite differently in the Soviet Union than later in East Germany. In the Donbass, for example, secret informants who told others that they were reporting on them were executed—something that never happened in East Germany. In addition, Soviet secret informants seem to have enjoyed more significant privileges (such as rapid job promotion or release from prison time) than did their Stasi IM counterparts. Although historians have made use of comparative analysis to explore many of the ways in which denunciation facilitated dictatorial ends, they have not addressed the most important consequence of East German denunciation: through its vast IM network, the Stasi morally compromised much of the East German elite.

The Files: Is the Past Too Present?

The Stasi files not only produce history. They also have a history. The two last publications under review offer very different interpretations about the significance of the opening of the Stasi files. A collection of essays titled *Wie weiter mit der Aufarbeitung?* argues that access to the files is essential to both uncover the mechanisms of East German dictatorship and to make a successful transition to democracy. This volume was published under the auspices of the Leipzig Citizens’ Committee for the Dissolution of the Former State Security Apparatus, the group that was at the forefront of the battle to open and preserve

²⁴ Sälter, “Denunziation,” 156.

²⁵ Volodymyr Semystiaha, “The Role and Place of Secret Collaborators in the Informational Activity of the GPU-NKVD in the 1920s and 1930s (on the Basis of Materials of the Donbass Region),” in *Cahiers du monde russe* 42, 2–3–4 (2001): 232, 240.

access to MfS documents. On the other hand, Matthias Wagner, briefly the main administrator of the Stasi files in 1990, argues in *Das Stasi-Syndrom* that the files have been used primarily as an instrument with which to deprive former East Germans of any influence in united Germany. What, then, is the history of the files since 1989? Which controversies surround the files? And what is their political legacy?

Among the formerly communist states, only Germany opened its security files. As described in *Wie weiter*, a very partisan publication, this was due to the heroic endeavors of a determined citizens' movement. In the winter of 1989–90, citizen revolutionaries occupied Stasi buildings to secure access to the files—the only revolutionary violence of the period. Some have thus argued that “the struggle for an adequate dealing with the legacy of the MfS was the ‘heart of the revolution of 1989.’”²⁶ Joachim Gauck, a pastor and dissident from Rostock, came to be the most passionate spokesman for opening the files. For Gauck, access to the files would ensure the “political, historical, and juridical working through” of the Stasi past; this, in turn, would speed the rightful de-legitimation of the East German dictatorship. Gauck also believed that if Stasi victims had access to their files, they would be able to reclaim control over their biographies. By engaging in “informational self-determination,” these former victims could also practice their new role as sovereign citizens of a democracy (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 246–47).

In August 1990, the East German parliament passed a law that allowed controlled access to the Stasi files. But when East and West German officials negotiated the terms of reunification, the law was ignored. In September 1990, citizens once again occupied the former Stasi headquarters and even went on a hunger strike to ensure the continued applicability of the law. In somewhat modified form, it was then adopted as the “Stasi Document Law” (StUG) by the (now-unified) German parliament in November 1991. Considerable significance has been attached to the StUG. Robin Lautenbach, for example, has written that “the law is the most important legacy of the peaceful revolution, [it is] an instrument for the elucidation of a dictatorship and therefore a preventive measure against all dictatorships” (*Wie weiter*, 10). The law is also seen as one of the few innovations that East Germans brought to united Germany. It has, for example, established a precedent of privileging the right to informational self-determination over the right to privacy of former officials of dictatorial secret police agencies.²⁷

The StUG established a federal agency to administer the Stasi files: the Office of the Federal Commissioner for the Files of the State Security Service

²⁶ Klaus-Dietmar Henke, “Zu Nutzung und Auswertung der Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 41, 4 (1993): 576. The phrase “heart of the revolution of 1989” was coined by the Saxon justice minister, Steffen Heitmann, in 1993.

²⁷ Rainer Eckert, “Die Geheimpolizei als Archivar und Historiker,” *Deutschland Archiv* 32, 6 (1999): 1044.

of the former German Democratic Republic. This agency is generally known either by its German initials, BStU, or as the “Gauck Authority” (after its first administrator, Joachim Gauck). Most of the BStU’s more than 3,000 employees assist individuals who wish to see their Stasi files, provide information to employers about potential employees’ possible MfS collaboration, or aid state prosecutors in their investigation of past treasonous or other criminal activity. Some 75 employees, however, staff a “Department of Education and Research.”²⁸ This department prepares educational materials about the Stasi and aids scholars researching the MfS. As several of the contributions in *Wie weiter* make clear, however, this department’s work has been heavily criticized. As stipulated by the StUG law, a scholar may work with the BStU files only if his or her topic relates to the history of the Stasi. These files, however, contain a wealth of information on many aspects of East German history; in particular, they are viewed as a rich source for social history. Scholars have thus pleaded for a broader use of the files (*Wie weiter*, 111–12). The department also employs its own in-house researchers.²⁹ These scholars enjoy privileged access to materials, particularly to internal BStU finding aids. By contrast, outside researchers must rely on BStU archivists to search for materials relevant to their topics; they cannot decide on their own which Stasi material to examine. Many historians now call for equal treatment for all researchers (see, for example, *Wie weiter*, 37–38).

Some of the most sensitive Stasi material pertains to unofficial informants. In the early 1990s, there was a steady stream of shocking revelations concerning who had collaborated with the Stasi. Most often, when individuals were identified as former IMs, their reputations were ruined; the political and other careers of many former East Germans were thus nipped in the bud. Some former IMs, however, put up spirited battles to salvage their political careers—and were supported by the eastern German electorate. Most prominently, Manfred Stolpe, the premier of the eastern German state of Brandenburg from 1990 until 2002, successfully withstood accusations of wrongdoing arising from his 19-year Stasi collaboration. Stolpe, a former Protestant church administrator, insisted that his Stasi contacts did not harm fellow East Germans, but rather facilitated church–state relations. The Stolpe case fostered wide-ranging popular and scholarly debates about the Stasi, IMs, and moral complicity in dictatorship.

Among the many East Germans caught up in this imbroglio was Matthias Wagner, who headed the Stasi archives from March to October 1990. Much

²⁸ Siegfried Suckut, “Eine neue Forschungseinrichtung stellt sich vor: Die Abteilung Bildung und Forschung beim Bundesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,” *Deutschland Archiv* 26, 5 (1993): 555–57.

²⁹ These researchers have published many of the most important works on the Stasi in the BStU’s publication series titled “Analysen und Dokumente, Wissenschaftliche Reihe des Bundesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik.” To date, some 24 monographs have appeared. A complete list of these and other BStU publications can be found at www.bstu.de/bifo/index.htm.

later, in 1997, it was revealed that he, too, had been an IM. Wagner then lost his position with the Bundesarchiv, the Federal Archives, and has since been unemployed. *Das Stasi-Syndrom*, another edition of the volume, is part autobiography, part history of the Stasi archive in 1989–90, and part diatribe against the political (mis)use of MfS files. Trained as an archivist, Wagner began work in the Central State Archive in Potsdam in 1975. Although never an SED member, Wagner nonetheless worked as a Stasi informant from 1981 onward. He writes little about why he agreed to collaborate—only that “my weakness, that I wanted to discuss things with everyone, was known.” He also barely describes what he passed on to the MfS—only that “I ‘reported’ things that I also related in other places around a beer table” (Wagner, 12).

Since Wagner was not a party member, he was viewed by the citizens’ movement as a good person to oversee the Stasi files in 1989–90. Through a rather confused narrative, Wagner nicely conveys the chaotic atmosphere surrounding the MfS files in the spring of 1990. He describes how Stasi officers tried and, to a certain extent, managed to destroy archival materials; for example, some 23,000 sacks of shredded files were dumped at the archive (many of these papers were later painstakingly pieced together by BStU employees) (Wagner, 86). Wagner also recounts the explosive character of his job: for a time in the spring of 1990 there was a real fear that so many of the individuals elected to the East German parliament that March might have been IMs that new elections would be necessary. Although Wagner privately wondered whether his past IM activity might disqualify him from his job, he did not publicly voice his concerns. He also apparently never tried to get and destroy his file—a testament to either his decency or his naivete.

Wagner devotes much of his work to decrying the political misuse of the Stasi files—what he calls the “Stasi syndrome.” Like others implicated in Stasi activity, Wagner insists that the real reason why the files were opened was not to study the repressive mechanisms of a dictatorial regime but rather to criminalize “the whole state ... and its servants.” He further claims that “with the files one had a ready instrument of rule: when necessary, careers could be unmasked and in this way those exposed could be pilloried” (Wagner, 7). According to Wagner, the opening of the files was a strategy to destroy the careers of East Germans so that West Germans would not face competition in united Germany. There is, in fact, an element of truth in what Wagner writes—an indigenous eastern German elite has indeed been thwarted by Stasi revelations. East Germany’s well-educated professional classes should have made up a new eastern German elite. But these were just the individuals tainted by MfS complicity—and not because of a western German conspiracy but because of the moral atmosphere fostered by the SED dictatorship. This, in turn, points to the true tragedy of East Germany: through coercion and manipulation, the SED regime ruined the life opportunities of many East Germans. Some could not pursue career or other opportunities in East Germany. Others advanced professionally but also

collaborated with the Stasi. The SED dictatorship destroyed the possibility of their future moral legitimacy—and so of holding political or other leadership positions in united Germany.

Recently, the most heated controversy concerning the BStU has involved files pertaining to “individuals who are of importance to contemporary history.” In 2000, Helmut Kohl, the former German chancellor, sued the BStU to prevent access to his Stasi files; these apparently contained information about his party’s “spending problems.” Many former Stasi officials and informants believed that was when serious doubts were raised about the use of the files. As Wagner writes, “[o]nly when prominent West Germans were to be investigated with the help of the files did reservations [about the use of the files] arise” (Wagner, 8). Beyond conspiracy theory, however, important issues were at stake. To what degree do Stasi victims who held political or other positions have the right to keep their files sealed? If they had and exercised that right, much Stasi material would no longer be accessible. The Kohl controversy thus pitted the rights of victims against the demand that Stasi history be uncovered so as to more fully understand (and delegitimize) the East German dictatorship. In March 2002, a Berlin court sided with Kohl. At that point, the BStU was forced to restrict access to files. In the absence of permission from Stasi victims, all files on public figures were no longer available, including those on deceased individuals. *Wie weiter* was published just after this court decision. Many of its authors thus pleaded for a new law to provide better and more secure access to the files. In fact, the German parliament did revise the StUG in July 2002. The new version of the law allows the use of files on individuals of contemporary significance provided that good-faith efforts have been made to secure these figures’ permission. In the event that an individual refuses access, the BStU is empowered to make decisions that balance the rights of victims against the demands of historical research. *Wie weiter* is now somewhat outdated. The new law has presumably allayed the authors’ worst fears about restricting access to Stasi material. As of this writing, BStU files—with the afore-mentioned restrictions—are available to researchers.³⁰

Conclusion

Are the Stasi files the key to East German history? Some historians argue that virtually no East German history can be written without taking the MfS into account. Thomas Ammer, for example, has written, “On the whole, the history of the MfS and the history of East Germany are so tightly interconnected that dealing with a historical topic about the MfS is always also an analysis of East German history and hardly any area of East German history can be presented without [analyzing] the influence of the MfS.”³¹ Similarly, Klaus-Dietmar

³⁰ For information on the Kohl controversy, see the BStU’s web site, www.bstu.de/aktuelles/presse2002.htm; and Hollitzer, ed., *Wie weiter*.

³¹ Thomas Ammer, “Die SED und ihr Geheimdienst,” *Deutschland Archiv* 31, 4 (1998): 653.

Henke has suggested that “the history of the state security service was just a part of East German history, but that history was ‘fundamentally shaped’ by it. There are probably only a few research projects concerning eastern German history after 1945 for which without hesitation the MfS aspect can be ignored.”³² There can be no doubt that the Stasi files have provided much important information on East German history. Without the Stasi files, for example, much less would be known about the doping of top athletes, resistance and opposition to the regime, the Stasi’s role in meting out political justice, and the SED’s influence on East German churches (*Wie weiter*, 31).

Some historians nonetheless question just how important the Stasi and its files really are to an understanding of East German history. Christoph Klessmann has argued that just as Nazi Germany was not simply an SS state, so, too, East Germany was not simply a Stasi state.³³ In his and other scholars’ view, fixating on MfS repression ultimately inhibits a fuller understanding of the complexities of East German history. In addition, as Henke has written, the unstinting focus on the Stasi “holds the danger of a reversal of historical and political responsibility and in the end a playing down of the SED political bureaucracy.”³⁴ The SED leadership, and not the MfS, was ultimately responsible for the East German dictatorship. This suggests that the key to East German history lies not in the BStU but rather in the SAPMO (the Foundation for the Archives of East German Parties and Mass Organizations in the Bundesarchiv).

Historians still differ widely in their assessment of the Stasi’s power. Some argue that the MfS controlled all aspects of East German society, others that it was relatively insignificant (Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 19). After 1989, revelations concerning the extraordinary number of Stasi officers and IMs, the infiltration of dissident groups and church circles, and the high numbers of Stasi spies in West Germany all suggested that the Stasi had been even more ruthless and omnipotent than previously believed. But the research findings presented in this review suggest that the MfS was more often than not unable to achieve its aims. The Stasi did little to smooth over economic difficulties faced by the SED regime; regardless of its interventions, the East German economy continued its inexorable decline. IMs often proved difficult to control; they were frequently inactive, ineffective, or, as in the case of Anderson, fostered precisely what the MfS wished to prevent. The Stasi also had little success in undermining West Germany; on the contrary, for many East Germans, the other German state proved an alluring temptation. Most important, the MfS failed in its primary task, preserving the SED regime; during the 1989 revolution, it was positively impotent. The Stasi was also often less nefarious than believed; Mielke did not, for example, have those soccer players removed so as to improve the chances of

³² Henke, “Zu Nutzung,” 585.

³³ Klessmann’s views are summarized in Schwartz, “MfS-Akten,” 537.

³⁴ Henke, “Zu Nutzung,” 576.

the BFC team. Recent historical works have successfully challenged the notion that the Stasi was the very model of an efficacious and all-powerful Cheka.

Given that the Stasi was unable to achieve many of its aims, some observers have argued that the Stasi's real power lay not in its actual but rather in its perceived omnipotence. The novelist Jurek Becker, for example, once stated that "one of the [Stasi's] greatest successes was that one often suspected that it was present when in fact it wasn't."³⁵ Similarly, the historian Charles Maier has written, "the Stasi provided the regime with its *arcana imperii*, the power of mystification and secrecy on which its capacity to corrupt independent action, stifle dissent, and preclude the emergence of a public realm depended."³⁶ Because the Stasi seemed to be omnipresent, individuals doubtlessly modified their conduct accordingly. In a very real sense, then, the illusion of MfS strength was an important source of the Stasi's actual power.

For East German history, the Stasi's true significance lies not in its real or perceived power but rather in its moral legacy. The record of personal betrayal found in the BStU files is the Stasi's most enduring feature. The high numbers of both Stasi officials and IMs meant that many East German citizens were morally complicit in the SED dictatorship. The author Jürgen Fuchs has claimed that the Stasi files represent the "Auschwitz of souls" (*Die Sicherheit*, 36). This is loaded language, but it does suggest that the Stasi's most reprehensible feature was not outright brutality but rather moral entrapment. The MfS did not produce corpses. Instead, it created corrupt citizens. Too many East Germans toyed with the lives and identities of others—from those of strong professional soccer players to those of vulnerable West German secretaries. Even today, former MfS officials, IMs, and victims palpably live the Stasi's legacy. Some will never enjoy permanent employment, others will never feel secure in relationships, and yet others will never know what their lives could have been. The Stasi lives on—and sadly, no amount of historical research will ever repair all the damage sowed by its institutionalized insidiousness.

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³⁵ Barbara Miller, "Wiederaneignung der eigenen Biographie': The Significance of the Opening of the 'Stasi' Files," *German Life and Letters* 50, 3 (1997): 376.

³⁶ Maier, *Dissolution*, 47.