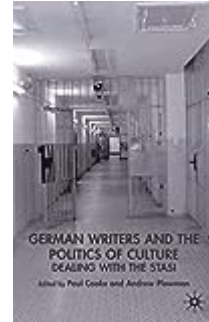


**Paul Cooke, Andrew Plowman, eds.** *German Writers and the Politics of Culture: Dealing with the Stasi*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. xxi + 262 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-1326-5.



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Anyone familiar with the so-called *Literaturstreit* of the 1990s appreciates the emotions raised and the difficulties associated with a society coming to terms with the involvement of a large body of its citizens in a sinister organization such as the Stasi. In this highly engaging collection of essays, compiled by Paul Cooke and Andrew Plowman, the complexities of what might be termed a “coming to terms with the Stasi” are seen through the depictions of the Ministerium fuer Staatssicherheit (MfS) agents in the works of German writers. The collection offers a wide range of rich examples of how Germans in general (and particular GDR citizens) have dealt with the Stasi’s enduring and troubled legacy in quite different and often constructive ways. Moreover, many essays touch upon a fundamental connection between the writers of East Germany and the power of the SED, one which raises significant questions regarding the tradeoffs faced in order to be able to publish, the extent to which complicity with a repressive government affects one’s integrity as an intellectual and artist, and the degree to which a more complex understanding of intellectuals under coercive governments is needed to replace a simple victim/perpetrator dichotomy. Furthermore, especially in the post-Wende era, the attempts at writers to deal with the Stasi also have raised poignant questions dealing with identity, reunification’s effects, and the legacies of German division. Indeed, the Stasi cast a long shadow

over East Germany’s history and these scholars correctly perceive that understanding the MfS legacy offers an important window onto GDR society.

In the introduction, Cooke and Plowman explain that the ways in which writers themselves have attempted to deal with the Stasi in their literary works has been largely neglected by scholars. Following a very helpful chapter by Mike Dennis giving an overview of the MfS’s methods and scope, the remaining thirteen essays, divided into pre- and post-reunification periods, deal with the literary representations of the Stasi in the works of both East and West German authors. In the pre-1989 section, Dennis Tate opens by examining Uwe Johnson’s depiction of a Stasi agent in his novel *Mutmassungen über Jakob* (1959) and the multipart *Jahrestage* (1970-83). Tate contends that Johnson’s secret policeman is portrayed as “the last of a dying breed of independently-minded private detectives” and thus does not conform to the typical evil, uncomplicated image of the Stasi (p. 37). Reinhard K. Zachau next explores Stefan Heym’s troubled relationship with the GDR and the striking figure of the Stasi boss in *Collin* (1979) who represents the evil that prevents the realization of “enlightened” socialism by stifling freedom of expression. Michael Butler’s essay follows next, probing Martin Walser’s allegorical novel *Dorle und Wolf* (1987) in which a bungling, conflicted

Stasi agent stationed in West Germany is presented as the embodiment of the divided German nation: "A broken national consciousness can only be articulated by a deeply damaged individual" (p. 60). The fascinating links between the MfS and other secret police outfits throughout German history conclude this section with Karl-Heinz Schoeps's essay on Hans Joachim Schädlich's novel *Tallhover* (1986). Schoeps observes that Schädlich, a victim of GDR repression, rejects a simple condemnation of the secret police agents while also drawing on history to raise concerns about self-appointed authority figures without popular legitimacy.

The post-1989 section of this collection begins with the most controversial author of the *Literaturstreit*: Christa Wolf. Georgina Paul posits that Wolf's *Was Bleibt* (1990) represents part of an authentic "poetics of self-analysis" in that Wolf critiques the repressive nature of the Stasi and, more importantly, reasserts her role as a public figure through an examination of her relationship with the larger community. Stephen J. Evans next presents his analysis of Eric Loest and his novel *Fallhhe* (1989), in which Loest describes a Stasi spy in the West who cannot seem to take his assignment or his superiors seriously. Loest dangles the possibility of the story being autobiographical to the reader, thus destabilizing the latter's distinction between reality and fiction, and ultimately preaching skepticism. Uwe Sger's *Die Nacht danach und der Morgen* (1991) is next interpreted by Owen Evans, who explores how Sger uses his multi-textual novel to make intriguing comparisons between the tasks of writers and those of the Stasi agents. Sger also reflects on the Stasi in order to lead to a greater understanding of his place in the new Germany, a lesson Evans thinks could be applied to all East Germans. Paul Cooke's own contribution examines Wolfgang Hilbig's *Ich* (1993) in which the protagonist initially finds comfort in working with the Stasi but eventually condemns their cynical manipulation of the truth. The informant also eventually understands the coexistence of resistance and coercion, both elements locked in a discursive struggle that defies easy characterization and in the process complicate simple Western stereotypes of East Germans.

Alison Lewis follows with her assessment of Brigitte Burmeister's *Unter dem Namen Norma* (1994), in which the protagonist makes a false confession to a group of West Germans that she was a Stasi informant. Lewis argues that this fabrication was calculated to both draw out Western stereotypes of East Germans as Stasi-collaborators and simultaneously undermine them by presenting a complex image of herself as both victim

and perpetrator. Next, Thomas Brussig's well-received *Helden wie wir* (1995), as analyzed by Kristie Foell and Jill Twark, paints an absurd picture of the Stasi that distorts its reality but has the effect of reducing the secret police's aura. If people cannot learn to laugh at the Stasi it will perpetuate "its hold on the GDR collective psyche" (p. 191). Nobel Prize winner Gnter Grass's *Ein weites Feld* (1995) appears next in Julian Preece's essay. Preece asserts that Grass attempts to depict the difficult responsibilities of intellectuals along with their compromises with power and ambiguous status between victim and perpetrator. Carol Anne Costabile-Heming explores Jrgen Fuchs's *Magdalena* (1998), a text that combines excerpts from Fuchs's actual Stasi file with a narrative that blends fact and fiction but nonetheless enables Fuchs to assess his life in the GDR. These elements lead Costabile-Heming to conclude that here literature provides an excellent site for a critical self-analysis that is lacking in most post-Wende East German memoirs. Andrew Plowman concludes the book with his essay on Monika Maron, exploring the use of autobiographical details in her book *Pawels Briefe* (1999), written shortly after her brief period as an informant to the Stasi was exposed. Plowman asserts that by utilizing autobiography Maron creates a vehicle for asserting personal truth and reaffirming the integrity of her biography; ultimately her attempts are hindered by the assertion that she has done nothing wrong, while simultaneously offering numerous justifications for her Stasi collaboration.

Overall, this collection of essays is lucidly written and offers fascinating and generally convincing insights into an array of issues arising out of the relationship between Stasi and writer. The various contributors are quite right to stress the need for a more differentiated understanding of this dynamic interplay; writers in most cases were not innocent crusaders against state oppression or power-hungry opportunists who sacrificed their integrity in order to exercise power. The reality was most often something in between, a fact that has been pointed out by many scholars such as Mary Fulbrook and David Bathrick. The contributors in this volume also raise many new insights, such as the parallels in function between writers and Stasi agents, the highly complex ways various writers have sought to combine fiction and reality in order to make sense of their own Stasi involvement, and the concurrent ability of literature to both place the Stasi in a larger spectrum of coercive state power while also providing a means to process and thus break the historical continuities. Another strength of the book is its incorporation of both East and West German perspectives

on the Stasi, including a number of exiled writers who lived under both systems. The effect is to not only offer contrasts in terms of depictions of the Stasi, but also to shed light on the crucial distinctions between the two states, and especially the difficulty many East Germans have had in asserting an identity in reunified Germany that is not heavily colored by the Stasi.

It should also be pointed out that several of the essays are exceptionally well-done, particularly Schoeps's piece on Schdlich, Paul's essay on Wolf, Evan's contribution on Sger, and Plowman's work on Maron. These scholars in particular combine a thorough understanding of the biographies of their subjects with sophisticated and nuanced literary analysis of the highlighted texts in order to provide compelling conclusions both on those specific works as well as on larger issues as well. Finally, the book's thorough bibliography is very helpful to professional scholars and students alike in identifying relevant secondary works and also in offering a helpful reading list for those seeking an introduction to important works of German literature over the past twenty years.

The criticisms of these essays are relatively few. It would have been helpful to include a longer section synthesizing the insights from the various essays. Some common themes are identified at the introduction, but by the end of the book one yearns for a more thorough comparative analysis: what, in the end, are we to make of these various Stasi representations? One also notes that the writers examined in this collection are among the most critically praised authors in modern German literature. Additionally, most essays seem to stress a somewhat celebratory tone, noting the high literary merits of the texts and the author's innovative insights into grappling with the Stasi even if they still cannot fully over-

come the difficult legacies of the secret police. This is not to say that these works are not deserving of such praise; indeed they are. One wonders, though, if the inclusion of more writers who were less successful at dealing with the Stasi past in their texts might throw those that were more inventive into a sharper focus. For every Christa Wolf or Erich Loest there were surely many more (and often less-skilled) writers who portrayed the Stasi in much more clear-cut terms that did little in terms of complicating perceptions. In short, if the intent of this volume is to analyze literary representations of the MfS, should not the dominant image against which most of the examined writers are struggling, be explored in greater detail? Finally, given the literary studies background of the contributors, it is understandable that direct quotes from the various writers are made in their original German. However, this fact might make the essays difficult to engage for undergraduate students or those with casual interest in the subject.

Despite these reservations, Cooke and Plowman have assembled an informative and perceptive collection of essays that do afford key insights into important broader issues not only for assessing writers in the GDR but also in coming to terms with one of the defining aspects of Germany's second dictatorship. Writers were perhaps affected by the Stasi in ways that other East German groups were not, both in terms of the extensive surveillance but also in terms of the equally extensive collaboration. Yet, as these various scholars have convincingly demonstrated, by processing the Stasi past in innovative and constructive ways, these writers might also provide a critical service to the larger process of working through the GDR's persistent legacy in the wider, reunified German community.

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