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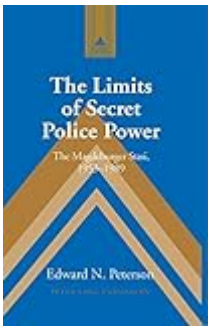

Edward N. Peterson. *The Limits of Secret Police Power: The Magdeburger Stasi, 1953-1989.* New York: Peter Lang, 2004. 330 pp. $74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8204-7050-4.

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The local study of Stasi operations is only in its infancy. Despite the overwhelming number of publications that have appeared during the past fifteen years–the most recent bibliography published by the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic (BStU) now exceeds four hundred pages of entries–relatively few deal specifically with the grassroots experience of the Ministry for State Security (MfS). Moreover, the bulk of these studies, written by archivists in the branch BStU offices and former members of the local citizens' committees, focus almost exclusively on the crucial events of 1989 that led to the demise of the MfS. While they provide some invaluable documentary evidence and commentary, their scope is obviously fairly limited. Too often generalizations about the Stasi have been made solely on the basis of Erich Mielke's inner sanctum in the Normannenstrasse, forgetting the fact that approximately one-half of all full-time MfS personnel worked in the regional administrations (*Bezirksverwaltungen*) and county offices (*Kreisdienststellen*) and that the vast majority of informers (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* or IMs) were handled on the local level. One must clearly look beyond East Berlin to discover how the Stasi truly interacted with the citizens of the GDR.

Edward N. Peterson, longtime professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, has chosen to investigate the MfS regional administration in Magdeburg. Created in 1952 when Saxony-Anhalt was divided into two smaller units, the Magdeburg region possessed considerable strategic value, not only because of its common frontier with the Federal Republic but also owing to the construction of a nuclear power plant near Stendal, a longstanding target of environmental activism. Peterson, however, also had personal motives, having been a frequent visitor since 1964 because of his wife's family roots in the area. He further hoped to juxtapose the results of this research with those from an earlier investigation of the ZAIG (*Zentrale Auswertungs- und Informationsgruppe* or Central Assessment and Information Group) office in East Berlin and the MfS regional administration in Schwerin, which were published in a previous book. Regrettably (as reported by H-German on March 26, 2005) Peterson died of complications from pneumonia several months following the publication of this work.

As Peterson states at the outset, his primary aim is to "offer the reader a micro-sample of the problems the MfS observed with its massive spy network, from 1953 up to the revolution" (p. 5). Drawing from the large number of district and county records that survived the destruction of 1989-1990, he presents his findings in the form of a chronological log, leaving the entries to speak mostly

for themselves and saving his own interpretation until the very end. Since only the reports from the county office in Halberstadt were available, the early chapters that deal with the 1950s and 1960s are relatively thin. The two major domestic events of those decades–the uprising of June 17, 1953 and the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961–found strong resonance in the area, and there were echoes as well of the dramatic events in Poland and Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. A dominant complaint among the populace involved the unreliability of the state-controlled media in reporting the news. At the same time, the MfS sought to increase the number of both full-time personnel and informers, even though the overall quality of the latter fell far short of expectations. The number imprisoned in that period totaled more than 3,000 persons.

The following decade saw the continued expansion of the Magdeburg regional and county offices, from 2,131 employees in 1970 to 3,060 in 1980 (at the time of their dissolution the number stood at 3,684). They directed much of their attention to signs of "decadence" among the youth, attributed primarily to the corrupting influence of Western media and pop culture. Another recurring theme in the reports concerned the chronic shortage and generally inferior quality of basic consumer goods. With the advent of the 1980s, these complaints only grew louder and more frequent, as mirrored by the escalating number of emigration applications by doctors, teachers, and other professionals. Despite many of the rote responses–industrial goals, for example, had not been met because of West German saboteurs and propagandists–one can sense some growing doubts in the MfS about the viability of the GDR itself (a speaker at a cadre conference in June 1989 noted that "the numbers dismissed [the previous year] show a serious problem, a capitulating behavior, the lacking [sic] of political clarity and insufficient preparation" (p. 199). The Revolution of 1989 receives the book's most detailed coverage. Uninspired party leaders had no credible strategy to deal with resignations in their own ranks as well as emerging political groups such as New Forum ("there was an unreal uncertainty among functionaries about who should be given SED medals in 1990," [p. 299]), and the MfS was forced to concede that it had become a "bogeyman" to the public. The last surviving records of the Magdeburg offices date from early December following the peaceful occupation by the citizens' committees.

Unfortunately, Peterson's pastiche-like presentation entails some very serious drawbacks. As no incident or complaint receives more than a couple of sentences before another is introduced, the book's readability, already marred by his unidiomatic translations and paraphrases, is significantly diminished. Even more disconcerting are the reports themselves, for the reader is given few clues about a document's classification or the identity of the recipient, neither in the text nor in the footnotes. Were they interdepartmental or intended for the local SED leadership or perhaps for ZAIG in East Berlin (which also had an offshoot in the regional administrations)? For a scholar, this vagueness severely limits the book's usefulness.

One also learns little about the personnel in the district and county offices, apart from some excerpted introductory remarks by JÃ¶rg Stoye, an archivist in the Magdeburg BStU office. Although Peterson notes that Wilfried MÃ¼ller, the head of the Magdeburg regional office since 1977, made great efforts to satisfy Mielke's demands regarding IM recruitment, there are no references to the estrangement that occurred during the GDR's final months. Particularly after Mielke's humiliating televised appearance before the People's Chamber on November 13, MÃ¼ller wrote to East Berlin emphasizing how this episode had created "an even more pronounced lack of trust within the MfS and greater uncertainty" among MfS workers.[1] Nor is the reader apprised of the fact that in April, 1993, MÃ¼ller was found guilty of embezzling roughly DM 350,000 from letters mailed from the West and of overseeing extensive telephone wiretaps during the final four years of the GDR's existence and given a two-year and three-month sentence.

There are other significant omissions as well. One finds no mention of Rainer Schedlinski, the Magdeburg-born poet who achieved notoriety along with Sascha Anderson as one of the prime Stasi informers in the alternative Prenzlauer Berg literary scene. It was Magdeburg in early 1979 where Schedlinski received an envelope from his brother in the Federal Republic containing two letters that he was to deliver locally. Stasi officers approached him almost immediately thereafter, and by June he had been successfully recruited and given the code name "Gerhard." For the next five years until his transfer to East Berlin authorities, he was handled by case officers from the Magdeburg office, who, although dissatisfied with this initial performance, came to praise him for the comprehensiveness and variety of his reports as well as his punctuality and discretion.[2] Schedlinski, moreover, represented a new type of IM whose main purpose was to subvert potential dissident groups from within, promoting, in his case, a wholly aesthetic and apolitical credo. This important shift in strategy during the 1980s

likewise finds no recognition in these pages.

In sum, Peterson should be given credit for having done some substantial archival spadework in tracing the mounting disaffection of the local citizenry. Nevertheless, his findings shed only a partial light on Stasi operations in Magdeburg, while his rather implausible conclusion–that local MfS officials (like those in Schwerin) had become quasi-dissidents by the fall of 1989–seems much too loosely and aphoristically argued. The first full and satisfying history of a regional Stasi administration still awaits an author.

Notes

[1]. Cited by Michael Richter, *Die Staatssicherheit im letzten Jahr der DDR* (Weimar: BÃ¶hlau Verlag, 1996), p. 46.

[2]. Excerpts of his MfS evaluations are contained in Joachim Walther, *Sicherungsbereich Literatur: Schriftsteller und Staatssicherheit in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Berlin: Links Verlag, 1996), pp. 642-646.

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