



Jens Gieseke. *Das Mielke-Konzern: Die Geschichte der Stasi 1945-1990.* Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2006. 319 pp. EUR 24.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-421-05952-9.



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The Stasi Revisited

Anyone attempting to write a concise history of the East German Ministry of State Security (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit; MfS or in German parlance, “Stasi”) faces two formidable obstacles. First, an extraordinary number of books and articles—of varying quality—on the subject have appeared since its collapse in 1990. In addition, huge archival holdings of the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records (Bundesbeauftragte für die Stasi-Unterlagen or BStU) are preserved both in Berlin and in the thirteen regional offices. Second, because the activities of the Stasi touched nearly every phase of life in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), a strong temptation presents itself to expand the exposition into a much larger historical framework. As one MfS officer ironically remarked in retrospect, it was only when every GDR citizen had become either a part-time informer (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* or IM) or a full-time Stasi employee that Erich Mielke’s ideal of a socialist society would have been attained.

In this volume, Jens Gieseke, a member of the BStU research staff, has surmounted these hurdles in a most impressive manner, providing not just a chronological

account extending from the policies of the Soviet occupation period to the post-unification controversies but also examining the function of the MfS within the ruling elite and its impact at home and abroad. It is also a slightly expanded edition of the much-praised original that appeared five years ago. While leaving most of the text intact, Gieseke has placed the MfS in a broader context by including more historical comparisons and has added many new titles in the very helpful annotated bibliography. Despite the numerous topical headings in the text, only an index is lacking.

As the title indicates, Mielke was a commanding presence throughout the history of the MfS. An important figure prior to the official founding of the ministry in February 1950, he became its head seven years later and only relinquished his power when the GDR neared its final days. Yet while acknowledging the impact of Mielke’s dogmatic and roughhewn personality, Gieseke’s analysis is rooted far more in institutional concerns. The early period of Soviet domination, which lasted until 1956, saw the development of the Stasi as an instrument of “bureaucratic terror,” as Stalinism became deeply entrenched in

the new East German state. The pitiless struggle against the enemy on all fronts soon emerged as an enduring and ceaselessly invoked watchword for the security apparatus.

In the post-Stalinist era, according to Gieseke, the MfS expanded its role well beyond the traditional functions of a secret police and intelligence-gathering organization and became a “mixed goods conglomerate” and “general enterprise for repression and preservation of power” (p.19). With its labyrinthine system of main administrations, departments, subsections, and other groups, it performed many duties normally reserved for the police, army, and other state institutions and was further augmented by thousands of disguised officers in special deployment (*Offiziere im besonderen Einsatz*). Gieseke tellingly notes that the secret police in other East bloc states were generally subordinated to the country’s interior ministry and never maintained such a large number of personnel relative to the population.

The enormous growth of the MfS was clearly reflected in the number of new full-time employees, rising from nearly 17,000 in 1957 to 91,015 in 1989. Whereas some historians view this increase as simply a response to major crises faced by the ruling regime, Gieseke offers another and more persuasive explanation based on his earlier authoritative study of the full-time staff of the MfS.[1] The most rapid growth of the ministry, which occurred between 1968 and 1982, actually corresponded with the era of *d’A*ntente. Realizing that greater contact with the West posed additional security risks—“the intensification of counterrevolutionary, subversive activity” in its words—the MfS redoubled its efforts with new personnel (p. 88). Line VI, which oversaw all passport controls and tourist traffic within the GDR, emerged as the largest single unit with over 7,000 employees. In addition, a new and more subtle strategy of psychological subversion surreptitiously executed (*Zersetzungsmassnahmen*) replaced an earlier emphasis on kidnappings and physical torture.

Given its immense size and scope, did the Stasi constitute a state within a state, as often asserted? Gieseke cautions against a simple answer to this question. To a large degree, MfS employees lived in a well-compensated, self-contained world, as their numbers were increasingly recruited not from the laboring class but instead from families whose parents worked in the police, army and security forces or in other branches of the state and party apparatus. Various building projects were undertaken on Stasi initiative, just as Erich Honecker met personally with Mielke on a regular basis. Yet Mielke’s in-

sistence that the MfS was preeminently the “sword and shield of the party” and never took a position at odds with the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) also rings historically true. In this regard, it is noteworthy that high-ranking party officials remained immune from Stasi surveillance and that the security forces assumed a largely passive role during the tumultuous events of 1989.

Gieseke sheds light on numerous other important questions. The inordinately high number of IMs, for example, should not be used to stigmatize former GDR citizens as a nation of informers. In contrast to the Third Reich, which relied heavily on volunteered information, East Germans were much less prone to spontaneous denunciations, thus necessitating a concerted and unending campaign of IM recruitment. The family unit in particular proved unusually resilient (the widely publicized case of Vera Wollenberg being informed upon by her own husband was more an anomaly than a reflection of normal practice). Regarding the elite image of the foreign intelligence branch (Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung; HVA) under Marcus Wolf, Gieseke rightly stresses its inseparability, both in word and deed, from the more mundane domestic units of the MfS. Until Western intelligence services release more of their archival records, as the author points out, it remains impossible to draw an accurate Cold War balance sheet, even though the HVA undoubtedly acquired a significant amount of military, economic and political information from its roughly 3,000 “unofficial” operatives, mostly in West Germany, and played an important role in the Third World by providing “Chekist development aid.”

Public perception of the MfS has undergone several distinct phases. During its ascendancy, academics and writers dealing with the GDR, apart from a few notable exceptions, paid little heed to the institution, despite its centrality to the life of the state. With the dramatic events in the fall and winter of 1989-90, the deep grievances of the East German citizenry vis-à-vis the Stasi surfaced in full view, but in the aftermath of its dissolution, too many sensationalized reports created serious misimpressions about the actual nature of its activities. In the meanwhile, during the past decade or so, scholars have examined much of the vast documentation that survived, thus allowing for a more accurate and nuanced picture to emerge.

Gieseke’s book could be said to represent a distillation of those efforts in a readily accessible style. Moreover, it comes at a time when former Stasi officers have taken a far more aggressive stance, in public meetings

as well as in various publications, to try to rehabilitate themselves.[2] As a result, the danger of a growing revisionist view presenting the MfS as an ordinary secret service organization that functioned within an established legal framework has become all the more acute, especially against the backdrop of *Ostalgie*. Not only does Gieseke's book deserve the widest possible audience in Germany, but an English translation would fill a glaring need elsewhere in the world.

Notes

[1]. Jens Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter der Staatssicherheit. Personalstruktur und Lebenswelt 1950-*

1989/90 (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2000).

[2]. Prime examples include the two-volume work *Die Sicherheit: Zur Abwehrarbeit des MfS*, ed. Reinhard Grimmer, Werner Irmeler, Willi Opitz and Wolfgang Schwanitz (Berlin: Edition Ost, 2002), already in its third edition; and the anthology *Kundschafter im Westen: Spitzenquellen der DDR-Aufklärung erinnern sich*, ed. Klaus Eichner and Gotthold Schramm (Berlin: Edition Ost, 2003). For a critical evaluation, see Karl Wilhelm Fricke, "LÄdierte Legenden: Der Nimbus der DDR-Staatssicherheit," *Die Politische Meinung* 431 (October 2005), pp. 41-46.

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