

**Babett Bauer.** *Kontrolle und Repression: Individuelle Erfahrungen in der DDR (1971-1989). Historische Studie und methodologischer Beitrag zur Oral History.* Schriften des Hannah-Arendt-Instituts für Totalitarismusforschung. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2006. 492 pp. ISBN 978-3-525-36907-4.



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**Published on** H-German (May, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

## Individual Experiences of Repression in the GDR

In an attempt to create a typology of individual experience of state repression in the GDR, Babett Bauer presents a total of twenty-seven interviews with individuals from Karl-Marx-Stadt/Chemnitz. At the center of the study is the attempt to create a theoretical basis for oral history that brings together the subjective experiences of repression of individuals and sets them against the official accounts of those experiences as recounted in the documentation created by the state security apparatus. Any attempt to create categories of human behavior in a society such as the GDR is difficult because of the wide range of possible interactions between personal circumstances and differing reactions on the part of state structures, but the author has succeeded in creating a credible typology.

Bauer creates five different types of individual experience: type 1 includes individuals who rejected totally the political system of the GDR and its social structure, often as a result of parental influence. This rejection led to the decision to leave the GDR by attempting to flee illegally, resulting in interrogations, criminal proceedings,

imprisonment, and finally deportation to the Federal Republic and social reorientation in different political and social circumstances. All her interviewees succeed in creating a new life under these new circumstances, but then experience further disorientation with the political changes post 1989 and unification, resulting in renewed confrontation with past experiences as a result of the opening of their files and subsequent meetings with people who wrote reports on them. Type 2 contains interviews with individuals who built up a strong resistance to the prevailing ideology of the socialist state as a result of their religious upbringing and a religious morality that stood in opposition to prevailing social and political norms. In the 1980s, this resistance developed into political opposition through alternative opposition groups linked to the Protestant Church: in particular, unofficial peace, women's, and environmental groups. These groups were particularly affected by the penetration by spies linked to the state security forces, which targeted Protestant Church activities. This type of opposition is characterized by a strong sense of moral purpose and a

determination to bring about a different social and moral order in the GDR.

The last three types differ from the first two in that the individuals involved did not seek a systematic change in their personal circumstances either by attempting to leave the GDR or by political involvement that attempted to bring about changes in the GDR. These last three groups provide examples of confrontation with the state and the Stasi as a result of a wide range of non-conformist behavior, either by themselves, or by third parties with whom they have relations, such as partners or friends. Type 3 contains examples of people who found themselves in conflict situations with the Stasi, which led to measures being taken against them. But then they find ways of coming to terms with their situation and through compromise manage to achieve forms of political rehabilitation and re-integration with society, despite in some cases considering the alternative of leaving the GDR. The individuals from type 4 come from the *Aufbau* generation, which identified in this early stage with the ideals of the state, but then became disillusioned by the reality of "real existing socialism." As a result, they came into conflict with state authorities, mostly at work, after criticizing aspects of that reality. But this experience did not lead to total disillusionment with the system, and they maintained hope in the ultimate success of socialism. This sentiment persisted after unification and was expressed in criticism of the post-unification situation and a tendency to emphasize the positive aspects of the GDR. The final group consists of individuals who were distanced from identification with the socialist state as a result of family backgrounds and personal experiences of crucial events in the history of the GDR, such as forced collectivization and the building of the Berlin Wall. A

typical reaction of this group was to lead a kind of double existence in the GDR, maintaining in private a hostile attitude while conforming in public. At the same time, this group had strong family connections with relatives in West Germany and maintained a continuing belief in the unity of the German nation. Despite maintaining an inner distance to the political structures of the GDR, members of this group also came into direct conflict with the state: for example, in 1968 with the Warsaw Pact action against the reformist government in Czechoslovakia, which resulted in measures being taken against them. Nevertheless, typical of this group is a sense of guilt after the collapse of the GDR that they had not done enough to express their opposition openly during the lifetime of the GDR.

Bauer gives a strong sense of the wide range of motivations leading to actions which drew the attention of the state security forces. Particularly interesting in the study is the way in which Bauer takes the individual stories beyond 1990. Clearly a major difference emerges here between individuals from type 1 who had restarted their lives in West Germany before 1989, and those from the other groups, who were only able to discover the extent of state actions against them and the identities of those who had written reports on them after the opening of the files in 1992. In general, Bauer identifies these attempts at closure as failing, largely because of the refusal of IM to engage honestly in the process. But for three of the groups, 1, 2, and 5, the importance of consciously pursuing the process of finding out their own personal truths and attempting to initiate the process of reconciliation with those who had colluded with the state authorities in the GDR is crucial in what they see as a necessary attempt to avoid the repetition of past mistakes.

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**Citation:** Peter Barker. Review of Bauer, Babett, *Kontrolle und Repression: Individuelle Erfahrungen in der DDR (1971-1989). Historische Studie und methodologischer Beitrag zur Oral History*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2009.

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