



Jens Gieseke. *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft: Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007. 391 S. EUR 27.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-525-35083-6.



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A New Direction for the Study of the Stasi

At first glance, the contributors to this volume on the impact of state-operated surveillance make for strange bedfellows. One group consists of academics steeped in social history, attuned to the theoretical formulations of Michel Foucault and Alf L  nke. The other, which includes several in-house historians at the Bundesbeauftragte f  r die Stasi-Unterlagen (Federal Commissioner for the Stasi-Documents; BStU), derives its expertise from the firsthand study of the operations of the former Ministerium f  r Staatssicherheit (Ministry of State Security; MfS or Stasi). The volume is the result of a one-day meeting in Berlin in March 2006, initiated by the BStU, of fifty invited specialists.

Their common purpose was to examine how the MfS influenced society during the forty-year history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Although many of the questions explored are hardly new—what, for example, did the concept of all-encompassing (*fl  ckendeckend*) surveillance mean in the conduct of everyday life, and what lasting effect did this experience have on the mentality of both the observers and the

observed—they are approached here with a more focused sense of inquiry. In his introduction, Jens Gieseke sets the overall tone of the book, noting that older methodologies such as a “top-down” model or one based on the themes of persecution and opposition have failed to give adequate consideration to the majority of the population (pp. 7-8). At the same time, the view put forth elsewhere by Mary Fulbrook that most GDR citizens never clashed with the boundaries established by the communist state and were able to lead “perfectly normal lives” requires, in his opinion, some considerable modification (pp. 12-13).[1] Acknowledging that the most propitious moment for this inquiry has probably passed and that researchers now face the rather unique problem of having too many primary documents for their perusal, Gieseke nevertheless calls for the reformulation of the study of the MfS in the context of a new integrated social and political history.

Structuring a book around the proceedings of a wide-ranging workshop is always problematic. The breakdown into five major categories provides a generally sat-

isfactory solution, even though an occasional arbitrariness has not been completely eliminated. In the first part devoted to theory and methodology, Thomas Lindenberger explores the concept of hegemony, especially as manifested in a one-party state such as the GDR, while Jan C. Behrends urges an end to the isolated examination of the former communist state and more interdisciplinary connections to the former Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact members (pp. 23-75).

The following section, devoted to ZAIG (Zentrale Auswertungs- und Informationsgruppe [Central Evaluation and Information Group]), with contributions by Gieseke, Siegfried Suckut, Frank Joestel, and Ralph Jessen (pp. 79-163) revolves around a long-planned BStU research project. By publishing the highly confidential MfS reports sent to a small number of leading party functionaries in certain critical years beginning with 1953, 1960, 1976, and 1988, the editors hope to shed greater light on the regime's decision making process.[2] These short topical reports, while underscoring the subordinate position of the MfS to the party, still raise the question of selectivity since their distribution depended ultimately upon the discretion of Stasi chief Erich Mielke. Numerous comparisons with the Third Reich also surfaced in the course of the workshop; in this instance, the ZAIG documents were contrasted with the *Meldungen aus dem Reich* (Reports from the Reich) prepared by the Sicherheitsdienst, which likewise sought to gauge the mood of the general population in the absence of independent polling units.

In the third part, Roger Engelmann projects what a BStU regional study of Halberstadt (Saxony-Anhalt) would entail under the rubric "Hegemony and Everyday Life under State Socialism" (pp. 167-186); Dorothee Wierling reflects on the different forms of personal memory—oral and written—in regard to the Stasi experience (pp. 187-208); Georg Wagner-Kyora investigates the reports of unofficial collaborators in industrial plants (pp. 209-252); and Jan Palmowski comments on the relationship between the MfS and social practice with particular reference to the writing of everyday history (pp. 253-272).

The seven remaining presentations fall into two categories, designated field studies and local studies. In

the former, Henrik Bispinck reports on how the reports of unofficial collaborators depicted the Goethe-Oberschule in Schwerin during the 1950s (pp.275-294); Renate Härtgen assesses how the Stasi affected the daily lives of workers in an industrial setting (pp. 295-317); Patrice G. Poutrus probes surviving MfS records for greater knowledge about transnational migration patterns (pp. 318-338); and Sandrine Kott provides a general commentary (pp. 339-344). In the latter, a team of Agnès Arp, Matthias Braun, and Jeannette van Laak propose an investigation of provincial cultural politics during the 1980s (pp. 347-364); Gary Bruce presents his empirical findings concerning local Stasi operations in two counties (*Kreise*) north of Berlin (pp. 365-379); and Thomas Schaarschmidt comments on this concluding section (pp. 380-383).

For lay people who found the film *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006) to be a moving experience and are anxious to pursue its themes further, this book will likely prove a disappointment. Even though a scene from the film is briefly sketched in the final pages of Lindenberger's essay (pp. 46-47), lengthy theoretical, methodological, and historiographical discussions dominate, and concrete everyday situations are rarely evoked. The main value of the book lies elsewhere. As historians struggle to identify the precise nature of the GDR—terms already advanced such as "consensual dictatorship," "welfare dictatorship," and "post-totalitarian" merely reflect the peculiar difficulty of this task—they will find an abundance of essential and suggestive points in this volume. It may be only a beginning, as Gieseke states at the outset, but it is a significant one.

Notes

[1]. Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

[2]. The first of these volumes—Siegfried Suckut, *Die DDR im Blick der Stasi 1976: Die geheimen Berichte an die SED-Führung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009)—has already appeared. The remaining years between 1953 and 1989 will be eventually documented as well.

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