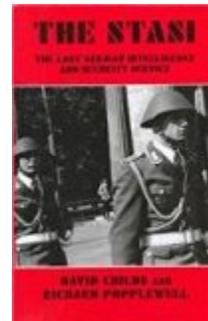


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Childs, Richard Popplewell. *The Stasi: The East German Intelligence and Security Service*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. XIV + 253 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1551-2.

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One of the most fascinating aspects of the defunct German Democratic Republic was its secret service, the *Ministerium fuer Staatssicherheit* (MfS), known by its popular abbreviation as the Stasi. East Germans still shudder at the recollection of this ubiquitous and immoral police organization whose octopus-like tentacles reached even into remote aspects of people's private lives. West Germans tend to recall with embarrassment the unending chain of scandals that exposed the successful penetration of their own state by communist agents from the other side of the wall. Even many Anglo-Americans remember it as a sinister force from Cold War movies or spy stories such as John Le Carre's or Len Deighton's fictional accounts. Sensationalist disclosures of the collaboration of prominent politicians, writers, and sports heroes, or of such techniques as the preservation of personal smells in glass jars in the city of Leipzig, have done little to undermine the Stasi's reputation for evil omnipotence after the collapse of the GDR.

Since secrecy breeds exaggeration, it is helpful to have a comprehensive scholarly treatment of this interesting topic in the English language. The contemporary historian David Childs (Nottingham) and the security analyst David Popplewell (Salford) have collaborated in a volume that probes both the domestic and the international dimensions of the East German secret service. Their British background provides an interesting, albeit sometimes a bit insular, perspective on the GDR which differs from the internal German debates about individual complicity and the external American assessments of intelligence breakdowns. The publications of the research branch of the Federal Deputy for the Documents of the State Security (Gauck-Behoerde), countless stories in the press (such as *Der Spiegel*), revelations in memoirs

(like Markus Wolf's autobiography), and some personal interviews provide a mass of fresh information on which such a preliminary overview can be based. Drawing on this evidence, the authors set out to debunk the Stasi legend by analyzing the nature and extent of its domestic power as well as by probing the methods and achievements of its external spying efforts: "The reality of the Stasi's success and the nature of the beast itself are, of course, central to this book" (p. xiii).

In some important respects, this effort at separating fact from fiction in the debate about the Stasi's secrets has been successful. For the general reader, the volume provides a useful overview of the development of the GDR's security apparatus, going all the way back to the founding of the German communist party in 1919 and culminating in the unexpected collapse of the second German state in 1989-90. Drawing on their contextual information about the development of the SED as well as their intelligence expertise on Soviet espionage organization, the authors present a broad-ranging discussion that combines the domestic with the international aspects of their subject. Especially helpful is the organizational discussion of the various branches, activities and personnel of the Stasi in chapter III, while personal anecdotes and some graphic examples, like the practices of postal surveillance, convey a sense of the frightful omnipresence of control in chapter IV. The discussion of espionage abroad centers on West Germany, the primary target of Wolf's infamous HVA, and offers pithy summaries of celebrated cases ranging from Otto John to Werner Stiller or Hans-Joachim Tiedge in chapters V and VI. In contrast to some journalistic flights of fancy, this is a sober effort at analysis, judicious in its judgment, and careful to confront inflated claims with the available evidence.

In other significant ways, the book is rather disappointing, even on its own terms. Its most important shortcoming is the lack of archival research which is simply inexcusable, since miles upon miles of Stasi files are now accessible in the office of the *Bundesbeauftragter fuer die Unterlagen der Staatssicherheit*. Like the defeat of the Nazis, the collapse of communist rule has made the files of the SED and of the GDR government as well as of important individuals like Egon Krenz available to researchers much earlier than the usual interval of thirty years. When I worked on this material several years ago, I found using these largely person-based records exasperating, but encountered more than enough policy-oriented documents from the center of Mielke's empire to provide a level of insight which is simply not available by reading secondary accounts. Especially in a field that is full of media sensations and wild allegations it is imperative to check at least some central elements of the story against the sources in order to get a sense of which accounts are reliable and which are not. Even if the reliability of their information about their targets may be open to question, Stasi records tend to offer a fairly accurate picture of the development of the secret service itself; and in case of doubt they can also be cross-checked against collateral external documentation. No doubt this is a gargantuan task, but its immense size is not enough of a reason for failing even to attempt it in selected areas.

A second rather serious shortcoming is the style of the volume, which is an example of the current genre of "lite book" preferred by university presses because of its brevity and presumed general appeal. But the result of authors knuckling under to sales considerations tends to be a chatty and superficial treatment that serves well as a general introduction for the uninitiated, but leaves serious scholars wanting more depth. Typically, there is no systematic review of the literature, leaving the reader at sea with a plethora of titles of rather differing reliability and credibility. In many instances, the text provides a useful background summary, only to stop just when the questions get more complicated and really interesting. For instance, the allusion to Christa Wolf's brief and early collaboration as informer does not mention the over twenty volumes of "victim files" that show her as a later target of close surveillance in spite of her critical loyalty to the regime. Also the recital of famous spy scandals leads to the somewhat surprising conclusion that these "successes" neither undermined the political credibility of the Federal Republic nor staved off the ultimate collapse of the GDR. In the Perestroika discussion, the different internal tendencies within the Stasi, some

of whom favored reform (Grossmann) while others opposed it (Mielke), are not mentioned though they might explain the ambiguity of some of the reports on the influence of Gorbachev. The result of such an approach is a compressed but rather conventional account that focuses on organization, persons, and incidents without exploring the more complex contradictions of the Stasi world.

A final problem of this book is its lack of engagement with perhaps the most interesting aspect of Stasi power, namely its mythical character. The authors only briefly discuss the psychological impact of the terror system and do not address the probing questions raised by such literary works as Wolfgang Hilbig's *Ich* or Guenter Grass's *Ein weites Feld*, just to mention a few. In spite of citing some egregious examples like the case of the dissident Vera Wollenweber, whose husband turned out to be an informer, the presentation of the effect of the secret police on individual lives remains curiously flat, unable to communicate the anguish of persons tarnished and broken by collaboration or to convey the pervasive schizophrenia between public speech and private thought. It would be interesting to analyze whether the Stasi was aware of the population's *Angst* and how far it consciously managed it in order to increase its control. Although the switch from initial brutality to more subtle methods in later decades is mentioned, the counter-productiveness of the expansion of the secret service bureaucracy with *Ostpolitik* is not discussed enough, leaving unanswered the question why ordinary people were at last able to break through their fears in the mass exodus or demonstrations, and with it the reason for the ultimate failure of intimidation. While the Stasi was very effective in combating traditional anti-Communist and pro-Western enemies of the 1950s, it proved incapable of dealing with a different brand of internal critics of the 1980s, who just wanted to get socialism to live up to its own pacifist, feminist, and environmentalist claims.

Compared to recent works by Norman Naimark, Mary Fulbrook or Charles Maier on related questions, the mixed performance of Childs's and Popplewell's Stasi book deserves only one-and-one half cheers. As an introduction for the general reader and for undergraduate students it will perform a valuable service in presenting basic information in a largely reliable fashion. It makes much new German material available in the English language for the first time, narrates of the outlines of the Stasi story, and discusses the variety of Stasi activities while examining some of the most famous spy-cases in competent and useful fashion. But this book will disappoint readers expecting more inside information, since

it contains hardly any new details on the domestic or foreign activities of the East German secret service that might go beyond the existing literature. More importantly, the authors' over-all interpretation that "intelligence played an important role in the downfall of the DDR by its failure to perceive the deep-rootedness of discontent with the socialist state" and its euphemistic reporting (p. 192) is not entirely convincing, since unpublished documentation from the MfS suggests that the failure lay rather in the incapacity of the SED leadership

to draw the correct conclusions from the increasingly alarming reports which it received in the summer and fall of 1989. This volume therefore presents a helpful starting point, but its pages also demonstrate that much of the actual primary research and the more complex work of interpretation remain yet to be done.

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