

H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Siegfried Suckut and Jürgen Weber, eds. *_Stasi-Akten zwischen Politik und Zeitgeschichte: Eine Zwischenbilanz_*. Munich: Olzog, 2003. 338 pp. Index. EUR 19.80 (paper), ISBN 3-7892-8135-2.

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Institutional Insights and Stasi Research Perspectives

This volume summarizes the state of research as it stood in 2003, after the opening of Stasi files in Germany beginning in January, 1992. Assessments are almost exclusively made by directors, employees, and historians from the Agency of the Federal Envoy for Stasi Records (known under its German acronym *_BStU_*). Such does not only reflect this volume's pattern, as it has been commissioned by the Tutzing Political Academy and BStU Research Department in the light of the 2002 ten-year-anniversary of file opening. It also represents the still predominantly institutionalized character of historical research into the vast records left behind involuntarily by the GDR's former Ministry for State Security in 1990. Altogether fifteen essays of varying length and quality have been grouped by the editors into four sections.

Section 1 on "Securing and Opening the Files" re-narrates and evaluates facts and relevance of historically unique events in East Germany when intelligence files were seized from a repressive state organ by courageous and daring "citizens' committees" all over the GDR in 1989/90. Being the only former Warsaw Pact country where this sort of thing happened, the singularity of the East German course with respect to public use of intelligence files has been predetermined ever since through these acts of seizures. Triumph was eventually completed when the political will of East Germans won over West German attempts to transfer the records and more or less lock them up in the Koblenz Federal Archives. Ensuing legislative processes in 1991 by the now all-German parliament finally led to the establishment of the BStU agency based on the Stasi Records Law (*_StuG_*) coming into effect on January 1, 1992 (see contributions by David Gill/formerly BStU, Roger Engelmann/BStU, and the late Wolfgang Ullmann, a former opposition activist and member of German and European parliaments). Short essays by the former and current BStU Federal Envoys, Joachim Gauck and Marianne Birthler, praise the opening of the files and underscore their ongoing relevance for German society.

The second section on "Conflict between Privacy and Appraisal--Stasi Records and the Public" contains two "legalese" contributions that by now have become history since events have moved on. Drawing on public disputes and legal battles between former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and the BStU agency, Joerg Pietrkiewicz (BStU) describes the interim status of the case as of late 2002, and Johannes Beleites (independent scholar) receives 37 pages to outline his 2002 motion for an amendment of the Stasi Records Law.

Section 3 on "Personal and Historical Appraisal of SED Dictatorship" contains more rewards for current users of Stasi files than the other three. It opens with a fine overview of Stasi activities against the small numbers of opposition activists in the GDR (Erhart Neubert/BStU), and a personal file report by Lutz Rathenow, proving again that he is a more distinguished former opposition figure than a writer. First-hour BStU archivist Jochen Hecht surveys the various record categories in his archive as a source on GDR history. Helmut Mueller-Enbergs (BStU) provides a very helpful factual overview of research into Stasi foreign espionage activities, in particular with regard to the Federal Republic of Germany. With his solid and unbiased approach Mueller-Enbergs has contributed to de-mythologize the Stasi's

western activities pertaining to legends spread by former Stasi officers and their detractors alike.

Despite the BStU historical research department's special access and integration in executive structures, its then director Siegfried Suckut makes a compelling case for why GDR historiography is better off with, rather than without, this department. He states correctly that German universities mostly neglect GDR history and its Stasi aspects but fails to mention that at least during the early 1990s this failure was in part due to awkward access and the BStU research department's very existence. Well worth reading is Jens Gieseke's (BStU) excellent and truly reflective essay on Stasi files and contemporary historiography, drawing on various tendencies of German publications on GDR and Stasi issues in the 1990s. Gieseke analyzes the problem of viewing the Stasi as a major actor in the GDR and aptly challenges the notion of an omnipotent Orwellian structure permeating an entire society. Comparing the GDR's relatively vast network of informers to the proportionately much smaller one of the Gestapo, he demonstrates how, by enjoying popular support, Nazi structures were actually stronger than the impressive Stasi numbers. The latter indicated major conflict areas in GDR society and a never-ending need for informers. Gieseke also pleads convincingly for the opening up of Stasi research for approaches and addressing social and everyday history of life in the GDR and its integration into contemporary historical writing.

Of value are both essays in the fourth section on "Vetting and Legal Appraisal." Bernhard Jahntz, State Prosecutor in the "Working Group on Government Crimes" during the 1990s in Berlin, presents a useful overview full of facts and statistics on legal actions, prosecution activities, trials, verdicts, and acquittals pertaining to GDR political crimes, reaching from doping of ignorant athletes to shooting orders and actual killings along the intra-German border. Harald Both is head of the actual BStU department mandated to deliver individual assessments based on Stasi files to vetting committees in all kinds of public and private institutions. He first sticks to a description of legal and practical proceedings and reports on internal investigations commissioned by the BStU in 1999. Though comprehensive assessments of vetting processes are still missing, Both claims that there had been "sensitivity" applied with respect to privacy rights. Vetting is said to have occurred according to "objective criteria" and "consistent yardsticks" (p. 307). Such a rosy picture might have been stipulated by law, but it was hardly upheld as a norm during a naturally dilettantic learning-by-doing process and an initial lack of broader consent on how to interpret Stasi records. In particular between the years 1992 and 1995, the unresolved informer case of then Brandenburg State Governor Manfred Stolpe, gross media campaigns and public pressure, targeted BStU leaking, and many overburdened individuals at the receiving end in the BStU agency as well as in countrywide screening committees, made some vetting processes messy and sometimes harrowing experiences. Actually, these problems date all the way back to the immediate aftermath of October 3, 1990, when in the eastern part of united Germany all of a sudden huge upheavals, shifts, and instant creations of large public bureaucracies had to be accomplished. This state of affairs made Stasi files a handy tool in vetting processes, stretching all the way from their eager application to willful ignorance. A lot depended on which sectors of public service suffered from personnel overstaffing or shortages. Many such stories are still to be told and researched, subsequently followed by analyses of why vetting processes went the way they did and what consequences these processes held for the credibility of Stasi files and public interest in them. Now figuring as an issue of a past decade, those processes have themselves become history and warrant respective historiographical treatment.

The BStU Agency's historical department has realized that its institutional future also rests in public outreach, international cooperation, and

increased connection with external researchers. User-friendliness still has some way to go, but first steps in providing finding aids and speeding up declassification procedures have been undertaken. It must be acknowledged that Stasi files require archival handling different from other government records. Despite legal turbulence in recent years surrounding the Kohl files, reasonable access is still guaranteed to almost all files of interest including on topics of international history. Deletions are less generously omitted than in the past but they may not really hamper serious research. External scholars, especially from outside of Germany, can only be encouraged to apply to the BStU "according to Paragraph 32 StUG" to request research on "Stasi activities with regard to [enter subject]"[1]. Searching for historical evidence preserved through the legacy of momentous events in 1989/90 when citizens seized files of an intelligence apparatus remains rewarding for historical research leads to insights not to be found elsewhere.

Notes

[1]. Bernd Schaefer with Henning Hoff and Ulrich Maehlert, *The GDR in German Archives. A Guide to Primary Sources and Research Institutions on the History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation and the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990* (Washington D.C.: German Historical Institute, 2002), pp. 12-14. View online at: <http://www.ghi-dc.org/guide14/index.html> .

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