

1992

Whose Revolution Was It? Stalinism and the Stasi in the Former GDR

Marc Silberman
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/gdr>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Silberman, Marc (1992) "Whose Revolution Was It? Stalinism and the Stasi in the Former GDR," *GDR Bulletin*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/gdrb.v18i1.1028>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in GDR Bulletin by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

³Sebastian Pflugbeil, "Stark oder Quark?" *CONstruktiv* 2.10 (1991): 14-15.

⁴Bernd Köppl, "Organisationsfragen werden zu Überlebensfragen," *Bündnis 2000* 1.25 (29 November 1991): vi-vii.

⁵See, for example, Friedrich Schorlemmer, "Deutsch Qwahlen," *CONstruktiv* 2.1 (1991): 12-13.

⁶See, for example, Heinz Klunker, "'Mut zur eigenen Verantwortung'. Ein Gespräch mit Christoph Hein," *Deutschland Archiv* 23 (1990): 1144-7.

⁷Schulz 16.

⁸Peter Schütt, "Auschwitz im November," *CONstruktiv* 2.11 (1991): 33-35.

⁹Günter, Erbe, "Der Schriftsteller und der politische Umbruch in der DDR," *Prokla* 80 (September 1990): 80.

¹⁰For more detail, see Roger Woods, *Opposition in the GDR under Honecker 1971-85* (London: Macmillan, 1986): 29.

¹¹Pflugbeil 14-15.

¹²Jens Reich, "Spießbürgerliches Klagelied," *CONstruktiv* 2.9 (1991): 13.

¹³Andrzej Madela, "Wolfgang Leonhard: Im Gespräch," *CONstruktiv* 2.9 (1991): 23-25.

¹⁴Vera Wollenberger, "Aufschwung Ost durch Ökologie?" *CONstruktiv* 2.7 (1991): 22-23.

¹⁵See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, "Die Stunde der nationalen Empfindung. Republikanische Gesinnung oder Nationalbewußtsein?" in *Die nachholende Revolution* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1990): 165.

¹⁶Bärbel Bohley, Antje Vollmer, Ulrich Herold, "Revolution in Deutschland?," *CONstruktiv* 1.1 (1990): 20.

¹⁷Vollmer in *ibid.* 19.

¹⁸See Peter Badura, "Staatsaufgaben und Teilhaberechte als Gegenstand der Verfassungspolitik," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 29 November 1991: 20-28.

¹⁹Antje Vollmer, Hildegard Hamm-Brücher, Heide Pfarr, Fritz Pleitgen, Gerd Poppe, "Paulskirche, zum zweitenmal," *CONstruktiv* 2.7 (1991): 8-10.

²⁰Wolfgang Thierse, "Alte Heimat - neue Nische? Sechs Sätze über die SPD im Osten Deutschlands," *CONstruktiv* 2.7 (1991): 17-19.

²¹Vollmer, Hamm-Brücher, Pfarr, Pleitgen, Poppe 8-10.

²²Birgit Svensson, Jürgen Schlenker, "Herta Däubler-Gmelin: Im Gespräch," *CONstruktiv* 2.6 (1991): 9-12.

²³See Johan Galtung, "Deutschland in Europa," *CONstruktiv* 2.7 (1991): 13-15.

²⁴Ursula Feist, "Zur politischen Akkulturation der vereinten Deutschen. Eine Analyse aus Anlaß der ersten gesamtdeutschen Bundestagswahl," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 8 (March 1991): 21-32. Uwe Thaysen sees the Round Table as the focus for hopes of a new order beyond "real existierender Sozialismus" and beyond the model of the old Federal Republic (*Der Runde Tisch oder: Wo blieb das Volk?* [Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990] 11.), yet he questions the representative status of the Round Table (16).

²⁵Jan Wielgoths, Marianne Schulz, "Von der illegalen Opposition in die legale Marginalität. Zur Entwicklung der Binnenstruktur der ostdeutschen Bürgerbewegung," MS of 1991.

²⁶A survey from September 1990 of 1,150 East Germans showed 15% satisfied with the state of their local natural environment and 61% dissatisfied. Only 1.8% felt enough was being done to stop destruction of the environment. Helmar Hegewald, Herber Schwenk, "Umweltbewußtsein ehemaliger DDR-Bürger," *Utopie kreativ* 2.6 (1991): 80.

²⁷See, for example, Robert Leicht, "Verfassung mit Klampfenklang," *Die Zeit* 21 (June 1991): 4.

²⁸See Lothar Probst, "People's Movement and Political Culture," MS of a paper given at the Seventeenth New Hampshire Symposium on the German Democratic Republic, Conway, 1991. Probst's study also indicates, however, that the election of activists as local politicians has caused local groups outside the official political system to shrink. Wielgoths and Schulz give detailed figures of local politicians from the *Bürgerbewegungen*. Dieter Rink's study of the situation in Leipzig underlines the relatively strong position of the *Bürgerbewegungen* at local level—Dieter Rink, "Bürgerbewegungen im Übergang," MS of paper given at the Seventeenth New Hampshire Symposium.

²⁹Ina Merkel, "Der Ausbruch aus der Illusion und die Renaissance des deutschen Patriarchats," *Utopie kreativ* 2.8 (1991): 17.

³⁰Michael Brie, "Wer setzt die Normen des wissenschaftlichen Diskurses?," *Utopie kreativ* 2.8 (1991): 65f.

³¹Peter Förster, Günter Roski, *DDR zwischen Wende und Wahl* (Berlin: LinksDruck, 1990): 97f.

³²Förster, Roski 121f. (Survey of February 1990). See also Walter Friedrich, Peter Förster, "Ostdeutsche Jugend 1990 - 11. Teil," *Deutschland Archiv* 24 (1991): 701-14.

³³Andrzej Madela, "Martin Walser: Im Gespräch," *CONstruktiv* 2.8 (1991): 9-11.

Whose Revolution Was It? Stalinism and the Stasi in the Former GDR

Marc Silberman
University of Wisconsin, Madison

The collapse of socialist governments in Eastern Europe has led to a situation full of ambiguities. At last it seems to be possible to talk openly, to name the mechanisms of social control, to document injustice and state criminality. At the same time, the political and economic insecurities resulting from the disintegration of familiar social structures have narrowed the public's tolerance of alternatives to the ideology of market consumerism and Western parliamentary democracy. It has become practically impossible to assert or

even imagine anything other than real existing capitalism as the goal of human development. Those who do insist on alternatives are branded as utopians or as Stalinists in disguise, a distinction which some would no longer even allow.

During the last three months of 1991 I have been living in Berlin with the express interest of observing closely the consequences of what it means to have lost the collective project of socialism, particularly among intellectuals and artists. In what follows I will try to provide an initial description of what I perceive as some of the coordinates and constraints in the discussion that is just getting underway. In

particular, I will touch on the implications of the increasingly inflationary use of the word “Stalinism” and the fetishization of the Stasi to erase forty years of intellectual and cultural life in the GDR. These two aspects strike me as especially pertinent because they suggest a fatal pattern for the process of constructing the historical memory of the GDR after its demise. The continuity in the perception of victimization connects the defeat of 1945 and the collapse of 1989 and beyond: victims of Hitler and National Socialism, hostages of the Socialist Unity Party and the Stasi, duped and deceived now by the promises of unification. Here the need to remember (and to forget) the GDR might well replicate mistakes that are all too familiar in the recent German tradition of historical cognition.

Stalinism has become a kind of universal explanation for the functioning of the GDR state with its centralized apparatus, endemic opportunism, authoritarian oppression and infiltration of the opposition. Yet such a general understanding of the phenomenon of Stalinism elides its historical specificity as well as its political consequences. Stalinism refers, first, to a series of tactics employed by Stalin to consolidate power in the national context of the Soviet Union (e.g. the Moscow trials and the reign of terror in the thirties, the Hitler-Stalin pact in 1939 to postpone war, and the formation of the Eastern Bloc at the Yalta Conference) and, second, it refers after Stalin’s death to Soviet hegemonic claims through bloody interventions in popular revolts in the GDR, Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. In this context Stalinism describes a dictatorial system where power is exercised through a single party, where the state and its organs (justice, military, secret service) are instrumentalized for the party, and where the public sphere is functionalized for ideological uniformity and unity behind the party. Of course, this definition is synonymous with totalitarianism, and the social sciences have provided an entire taxonomy of categories and concepts that may be applied to right as well as left dictatorships. Moreover, some manifestations of totalitarian systems, such as bureaucratization, apathy and a sense of political blockage, even seem to be shared with advanced capitalist societies.

I am unsatisfied with this broad definition of Stalinism as a centralized, hierarchical and authoritarian system for two reasons. The GDR’s very instability, that is, its inability to totalize control that manifested itself in the collapse of 1989, would seem to demonstrate how notions of power and domination must be understood in a complex way. Specifically, the GDR was not as totalitarian as the Soviet Union was in the 1930s and 1940s, when it faced economic isolation and physical threat from Nazi Germany. To be sure, the purges and show trials in the fifties, the cultural freeze introduced at the Eleventh Plenary in 1965, the silencing of critical intellectuals around the Biermann expatriation in 1976 all employed typical Stalinist procedures to pressure the critical opposition in the GDR: forced admissions through fear or opportunism, manipulation of laws to serve “higher” state needs, the sowing of distrust among friends and colleagues, ritualistic arrests and trials, and prison sentences or expulsion. Yet, to avoid the summary dismissal of the GDR by those who would only allow a moral judgment of political life, distinctions must be elaborated which can account for the existence of free spaces within the system, even of an opposition. Second, the identification of the GDR as a Stalinist regime errs in the other direction as well by hardening the boundary between Stalinism and communism, making it all too easy for sentimentalists to separate the latter’s utopian core from the deformations of the former. This way of conceiving Stalinism’s premodern, nineteenth-century

notions of redemption fed into Stalinism’s traditional hierarchical structures and management of human needs should not be ignored.

Another consequence of defining the GDR as a Stalinist regime is the tendency to move one step further by focusing on Stalinist crimes and their victims as an historical injustice that cries out for moral censure and financial reparations. The comparison to Nazi crimes against humanity is obvious and has been invoked with regularity. Jürgen Fuchs’s reference in a *Spiegel* article to the “Holocaust in der Seele” in the wake of Stasi revelations, and the comparison in a newspaper of a former Stasi employee turned informer to Serge Klarsfeld and Simon Wiesenthal are only two examples, but typical ones. The implications of such comparisons are more than problematic and may be illustrated most succinctly in the discussions surrounding the memorial at the Buchenwald concentration camp outside Weimar. Established early in the GDR as a major site for documenting the fascist crimes against humanity, the impressive memorial (with a museum, a large staff, a famous commemorative sculpture by Fritz Cremer, etc.) typified the official historical interpretation of National Socialism as a fascist regime installed by a conspiratorial elite with the support of industrial capital. In this version, the victims were Communist Party members—THE antifascist resistance—who suffered and were vindicated in the triumphant victory of a socialist Germany, the GDR. For years there had been international criticism of this historical distortion which left the Holocaust, i.e. the genocide against the European Jews, practically unmentioned as well as the systematic killing of members of other resistance and oppositional movements, of homosexuals, gypsies, and other discriminated groups. This revision, which was quickly undertaken and proceeds still now after the collapse of the GDR, has been displaced by another controversy, however, for it soon came to public attention that after 1945 Buchenwald continued until 1949 to function as an internment camp under the administration of the Soviet Military Authority. Witnesses have begun to document how political prisoners (mainly former Nazis, but also critical communists and social democrats) were interned and often died in the camp owing to the harsh conditions. The result is a symmetry established between the Nazi concentration camp and the Stalinist internment camp (sometimes understood as the entire GDR), while the role of victim and victimizer is reversed. Heirs to the silent but willing majority of the Third Reich now feel justified in demanding recognition and restitution for suffering at the hands of communist oppressors. If nothing else, such an historical twist reveals the limits to binary thinking, but also the inability to differentiate accidental but justified punishment from arbitrary injustice. The “new” victims are caught in the old GDR categories of martyrs and heroes, and the line between innocence and responsibility disappears.

There are symmetries between 1945 and 1989: the collapse of a system of political domination, including social relations, norms and ideals; the elimination of its political structures and mechanisms; the beginning of a restorative period in which the citizens are relieved of their own sense of responsibility. Yet to trace such analogies feeds what I see increasingly as an historically mediated German readiness to blame someone else (the Other) for political deficits. In this instance I find differences more essential than analogies, and not because stressing the continuity between two totalitarian systems throws into question the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Much of the discussion about Stalinism in the GDR,

however, does come close to a late vindication of the recent *Historikerdebatte* by equating the victims of Nazism and Stalinism. In particular, for West Germans the process of seriously assessing GDR history opens up problems of the past and remembering at a point when it finally seemed as if postwar economic success and political stability had created the necessary distance to the mistakes and crimes of the Third Reich. For them, this repressed history had finally entered the safety of the museum, and its problematic aspects had shifted into the sphere of culture (treated ad nauseum in novels, films, exhibitions, etc.).

During the fifties and sixties in the GDR, on the contrary, the memory of the Third Reich and the antifascist struggle remained in the public sphere, and not only as an instrument for legitimating political hegemony. The experience of defeat proceeded precisely through antifascist ideology; loss was transformed into a new identity structure by means of the symbolic behavior of substitution. With growing historical distance and the inevitable shift in generations, this framework became increasingly ritualized.

Confronted by the official image of fascism as the absolute evil, the SS as inhuman beasts, and West Germany as the historical heir of National Socialism, the younger generation could choose between only two possible reactions to the Nazi past: concern or disregard. The former led directly to the State sanctioned, legendary version of the past; the latter led to a vacuum (which since has been occupied by neo-fascist gangs). In other words, in the GDR, identification with the antifascist past blocked a critical perspective in and on the GDR itself. Antifascism became a moralistic excuse for the deficits of the present and for justifying the Cold War logic of ideological enemies.

If in the former GDR "Stalinism" has converted the issue of responsibility into an abstraction by shifting attention away from the individuals who exercised it and the mentality that tolerated it; in the West the Stasi has become a fetish that implicates every GDR citizen in a web of culpability. This is not to say that there has been no interest in the secret police in the new Federal States. On the contrary, during the past eighteen months a veritable avalanche of confessions, memoirs, interviews, and documentations of Stasi victims and employees has appeared, not only, but primarily in presses and films from the former GDR. The Stasi's power as the instrument of the State's bureaucratic terror is slowly being revealed as the systematic functionalization of personal and social trust for political ends. Although in the East these disclosures have elicited spontaneous expressions of disbelief, anger, and vengeance at the scope of surveillance, in fact, the large majority of former GDR citizens who had no direct contact with the Stasi seem to consider its deeds to have been simply one more instance of the dependency relations that permeated their daily existence. In families (tight housing forced adult children to live with parents much longer than in the West), in marriages (the necessity of two incomes to sustain a minimum standard of living created financial dependencies between partners that had nothing to do with emotional attachments), in schools (independent thinking was virtually blocked in the educational sphere), and in the market place (goods and services were acquired through a complicated network of informal connections and favors), personal loyalties and institutional pressures defined the limits of social equality. And in this system these limits became more and more arbitrary, distorted by privilege and access.

The GDR has been described as a *Nischengesellschaft*, a kind of paternalistic social contract in which the State maintained its power monopoly by promising efficient management in the socio-economic sphere, while the citizens protected their individual autonomy in apparently unpolitical free spaces made possible by a rising standard of living (family, home, hobbies, vacation, etc.). This mutual arrangement was not only a survival strategy but also the basis for constituting a GDR identity, at least as long as the State could make good on its promise. As social and economic differentiation grew during the eighties, new forms of passive and active resistance led to the dissolution of the "contract" and ultimately to the end of the GDR. Not unlike the typical middle class West German citizen, the GDR citizen's self-image was apolitical and to a large extent defined by the family rather than within any larger political or social collective. Self-identity derived from the capacity to adjust to (ugly) realities, so that conformity came to be regarded as a talent rather than a liability. The Ministry for State Security was crucial in guaranteeing the state monopoly on power as well as the apolitical character of individual autonomy. No wonder, then, that many GDR citizens did not and still do not perceive the Stasi as a constant threat or terror apparatus, while for many West Germans it has taken on the aura of a cancer that invaded the entire body politic. The virtue of conformity has been redefined suddenly as complicity in a criminal system.

These generalizations, of course, do justice to the spectrum of responses in neither East nor West, but they are especially characteristic for the public recriminations directed toward intellectuals and artists from the GDR.

At first this seems surprising to an outsider like myself, who appreciated any space that could be claimed by critical, oppositional, or dissident intellectuals. In retrospect, however, it is easy to see how these reformers came to be identified with Stalinism. As "socialism" came to mean no more than the failure of the old regime, those who had enjoyed its privileges and, even more so, those who still sought to reform it from the inside before "revolution" was even on the agenda, were suddenly contaminated by the corruption and implosion of that moribund past. Hence, Christa Wolf as state poet in the view of some Western critics.

This is right, but it does not go very far. Moreover, it seems to reveal typically Western, market-place expectations (and disappointments) about artists who are supposed to function as metaphors for social relations, validating the possibility of extreme modes of existence. The relationship between intellectuals/artists and the "people" in the GDR, however, was anticipated by Stalin in the thirties already as a pedagogical one in which the former were to serve the State's need for stability and to be rewarded accordingly. Yet all totalitarian states distrust the power of the written and spoken word, and with good reason. If language provides access to truth, then it is especially important to maintain the party monopoly on language; this explains the elaborate systems of control in the publishing and public spheres. Thus, the parameters of intellectual life were fundamentally different in the East than in the West. In the GDR, intellectual and artistic contributions moved between the poles of loyalty (support of the existing power structure) and critical loyalty (its reform), whereas those who dared radical critique were marginalized or expelled with all the power of the State. The room for oppositional heroes within the GDR was practically nonexistent (cf. Havemann), while those who became oppositional

heroes through expulsion lost their public. Survival strategies were schizophrenic: private reservations and public pronouncements; critical rationality and prudent accommodation; utopian insight and intentional blindness. Indeed, talent in the GDR could be measured in direct relation to the distance between the terms of contradiction that an individual could abide...and express.

Two controversies this past fall that have gained much public exposure indicate the new parameters being traced for artists and intellectuals. While many perceived the GDR intelligentsia as tolerated but powerful court jesters in a semi-feudal state, in the post-GDR they are just jesters. Wolf Biermann's spectacular accusation about Sascha Anderson's longterm collaboration with the Stasi in his *Büchner-Preis* speech and the background details provided by Jürgen Fuchs in a *Spiegel* series have fueled suspicions that the entire artistic scene was Stasi-controlled and manipulated. Anderson had been identified with dissident writers and artists since the early seventies in Leipzig and in the eighties he became a leading figure in East Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg circle of young, explicitly nonpolitical dropouts from official GDR culture. If he was a Stasi mole, even after having left the GDR for West Berlin in the mid-eighties, then everyone else, including those who were victimized by the Stasi, appears suddenly as hopelessly gullible dupes or as potential Stasi collaborators. Perhaps the Stasi itself organized the opposition against the state! Furthermore, the complete decimation (*Abwicklung*) of all GDR cultural institutions gains a moralistic, denunciatory legitimacy: they were all infected by the Stasi cancer in any case.

The removal by the Berlin Senate of Heinrich Fink from his position of democratically elected Rector of the Humboldt University, owing to suspicion of Stasi collaboration as documented by the Gauck Commission, illustrates another side of the equation. Professor of theology and longtime director of the Theology Department, Fink admitted his regular meetings with security police in his capacity as high level administrator in a state institution, but he has disputed accusations of having been a Stasi official. More importantly, Fink emerged in the past two years as an effective leader in the democratic reform movement of the University, stressing and protecting the internal efforts to transform the institution, rather than simply importing models and staff from West Germany, as has been the case in almost all institutions of higher education. Fink's summary dismissal without due process raises a number of questions ranging from the degree of institutional autonomy the government allows to the power invested in the Gauck Commission in its role of determining and interpreting the import of Stasi documents. I find the topic of personal culpability less interesting, however, than the symptomatic reactions on the part of the students and faculty. The spontaneous expression of solidarity with Fink through a student strike and a protest meeting of prominent intellectuals at the Humboldt University represents one of the first occasions since the unification process began in which those involved have articulated their own demands based on their own experience. At the same time, the emotional solidarity has become so closely identified with the person Fink that an

analysis of the larger issues of continuity and responsibility for the past is blocked.

A widespread reaction among many of my acquaintances in East Berlin is resignation and melancholy: from their view an atmosphere charged with retribution and self-righteous distrust is not conducive to open, analytical discussion. I see this attitude as potentially the most serious block to finding a creative, productive approach to the past (and the present) because it offers its own kind of defiant pleasure for those who are constantly reminded of being the "losers." Undoubtedly melancholy is their defense against the experience of loss, complicated in this instance by the fact that the very structures and institutions for reflecting on values, identity, and traditions have themselves disintegrated. What seems like a quixotic effort by Heiner Müller to prolong the life of the Akademie der Künste (Ost) over which he presides is, then, neither an act of nostalgia nor a refusal to let go of the past. It is rather precisely the desperate attempt to sustain a public discussion between the past and the future, a bid for dialogue with an unsympathetic partner. Meanwhile, this partner—the West German public in the largest sense—defines the terms of the discussion: denunciation of GDR institutions and intellectuals, criminalization of "metaphysical" crimes such as believing in a socialist utopia, exclusion of the guilty, and, least offensively, pure disinterest. That the unification process might implicate the West Germans' self-definition as well, demanding of them an examination of past political behavior and values (I think, for example, of the anti-communist hysteria of the fifties, the *Berufsverbote* of the seventies or the smug conviction in the strength of their democracy) remains a moot point.

My comments are intended to suggest how the process of forgetting is shaping the memory of the GDR. Re-collection means creating categories and defining hierarchies of importance anew after a disruption. I interpret the anxieties that have surfaced during the transition as a good sign; they are an appropriate affect of loss and disorientation. The problem I foresee is that the partner in this process, the empathetic witness who helps constitute the public context of response to the rupture, refuses to participate in a fruitful way. At this point, then, I am especially concerned that the revolutionary events from September 1989 to March 1990 may be smothered by a legalistic or moralistic discussion of Stalinism and the Stasi. Too frequently I hear the dismissive comment that a relatively small number of people toppled the SED, that Gorbachev and Kohl were the main agents of change or that the revolutionary goals were coopted by greed and electioneering. As a result, the unique emotional experience of participating in revolutionary change is being displaced by a kind of ideologically defined patience or passivity. Yet, if historical memory plays any role in determining future political decisions, then precisely the emancipatory movements of the past are a crucial component of that memory, especially for the Germans, who lack a strong tradition in this respect.

(January 1992)