

Introduction

TEN YEARS AND FORTY-FIVE DAYS



Shortly before midnight on 13 March 1990, Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) disembarked from the Federal Border Guard helicopter in the garden of his official residence to relax and have a drink in the chancellor's bungalow. He was joined by his wife, by Bernd Neumann, the chairman of the CDU in Bremen, who was working at the time as an election-campaign advisor in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and by Michael Roik, Kohl's office manager at CDU party headquarters. The chancellor had just returned from an election campaign appearance in the GDR. It was only five days until the first free elections to the East German parliament, the Volkskammer, and not even the pollsters could give a reliable prediction as to how they would turn out. The first polls showed the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) clearly in the lead, but the Alliance for Germany coalition, supported by the Western CDU, seemed to be gaining ground.

Suddenly the chancellor received word from East Berlin that, according to the East German attorney general's office, one of CDU's main hopefuls, Wolfgang Schnur, was actually a longtime IM, or unofficial collaborator, of the East German Ministry for State Security (MfS). Schnur was chairman and the leading candidate of the Democratic Awakening (Demokratischer Aufbruch) party, which together with the East German CDU and the German Social Union (DSU) formed the Alliance for Germany coalition, forged by Kohl and CDU headquarters in Bonn. Kohl alerted the CDU's general secretary:

I immediately called Volker Rühle, who was already in bed, and asked him to come over right away. Then we called Eberhard Diepgen in Berlin and woke him up too, to tell him that Neumann would be landing on the first plane at Tegel [airport]. Both men together were to contact Schnur immediately in order to question him and clear things up.¹

The two emissaries acted fast. Schnur had checked into St. Hedwig's Hospital in Berlin just a few days earlier, allegedly on account of physical exhaustion caused by the strain of campaigning. Before the news could reach the press, Schnur attested to his MfS involvement and announced from his sickbed to Neumann and Diepgen that he was resigning from all his offices. The two CDU politicians rushed to Cottbus, where Kohl had just made the second to last of his six big campaign appearances. The news went straight to the press.

The political career of Schnur was over—a man who had shown a commitment to change like no other in the preceding months, attempting to bring the motley opposition force of Democratic Awakening in line with the chancellor's policy. Like many organizations of the citizens' movement, Democratic Awakening had been founded in October 1989 by a rather chance mixture of seasoned dissidents. Its leading figures were theologians like Rainer Eppelmann, Ehrhart Neubert, Edelbert Richter, and Friedrich Schorlemmer, as well as neurologist Sonja Schröter. As a synod member of the Protestant Church and the lawyer of countless conscientious objectors and dissidents, Schnur, too, came from this scene. The pro-CDU policy of Chairman Schnur had led to fierce conflicts within the party in December 1989 and January 1990, causing the left wing of the movement to leave the party and join other organizations such as Alliance 90 (Bündnis 90) or the SPD. Others such as the physicist Angela Merkel, the future federal chancellor, joined the party during these weeks.

Schnur and his "turncoats of the Revolution"² found an open door at CDU headquarters in Bonn, helping its campaign planners out of a fix. The SPD had somewhat unexpectedly acquired a partner in the East, in October 1989, with the founding of the Social Democratic Party of the GDR (SDP), and began to reminisce about the ancestral heartland of the workers' movement in Thuringia and Saxony. Its top candidate was the colorful Ibrahim Manfred Böhme, who was also later revealed to have been a longtime informer for the Stasi. Unlike the newly founded SDP, the East German CDU had for decades been a compliant bloc party whose chairman, Gerald Götting, was in every way equal to SED leaders in terms of his smugness and ignorance. Only in November 1989 did the bloc party seek to become independent of the "vanguard party" of the GDR. The CSU, the CDU's Bavarian sister

party, had already found a partner in the DSU, a new conservative party founded in December 1989 by hitherto low-profile figures.

The Christian Democrats in Bonn made a virtue out of necessity. In early February they had summoned the chairmen of the Eastern CDU, Democratic Awakening, and the DSU to West Berlin, where they forged the electoral coalition Alliance for Germany, taking advantage of the West German chancellor's great popularity in East Germany. Whereas the Eastern CDU, unloved in Bonn, contributed a considerable amount of staff and organizational resources, Schnur and his party colleagues stood for the alliance's civil-rights legacy. The DSU distinguished itself by its strident anti-socialist tone. Though the alliance was primarily conceived as an election-campaign platform for the federal chancellor, who obviously enjoyed enormous popularity in the GDR, Schnur had his sights set on the office of East German minister-president, should the alliance emerge victorious in the elections.

The exposure of Schnur in the homestretch of the campaign came at the worst possible time for the Kohl alliance, and yet it was not quite as surprising as the chancellor made it out to be later in his memoirs. As early as 29 January, the Hessian State Office for the Protection of the Constitution had informed the state's minister of the interior, Gottfried Milde (CDU), about a list of twenty-three prominent Stasi informers, among them Wolfgang Schnur and general secretary of the CDU, Martin Kirchner. The names were supplied by a high-ranking MfS officer who had defected to the West. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution in Cologne, West Germany's domestic intelligence agency, was also involved in questioning the Stasi officer. Both Offices for the Protection of the Constitution confirmed the names on the list after Hessian CDU general secretary Franz-Josef Jung lodged an inquiry. Whether people in the government offices and party headquarters believed the news is unclear. They had reason enough to suspect targeted disinformation campaigns designed to damage the reputations of the new political hopefuls, not to mention the fact that there was little interest in burdening the already uncertain election outcome even more by publicly discussing such things.

Civil-rights activists at the Central Round Table—the discussion forum of reform-willing government forces and opposition groups in the GDR—had received anonymous letters to the same effect in early January. The letters named the correct MfS unit and one of Schnur's code names. They, too, were not out to make the case public, given the lack of substantial evidence. Schnur pressed charges against persons unknown, claiming he had been defamed. The allegations gained

substance, however, when in Schnur's hometown of Rostock the investigative groups of the local citizens' committee, the state prosecutor, and the archivists appointed to the case came across extensive written documents under the code names "Dr. Ralf Schirmer" and "Torsten." A total of thirty-one well-filled filing folders revealed without a doubt that attorney Schnur had been an unofficial collaborator of State Security under these code names since 1964 and had received numerous honoraria and awards for his work. A handwriting analysis ordered by the attorney general's office in East Berlin left no doubt about the matter.

From 5 to 8 March 1990, the Rostock citizens' committee confronted Schnur with its findings and informed the party executive of Democratic Awakening, as well as the federal chancellor. Schnur denied having been a Stasi collaborator and severely reproached the alleged smear campaign of the citizens' committee. Numerous Alliance politicians such as its general secretary, Volker Rühle (West German CDU), and Oswald Wutzke (Democratic Awakening) joined the chorus of condemnation. Meanwhile Schnur retreated to his sickbed.

On Monday, 12 March, a former Stasi case officer of Schnur's reported in *Spiegel* magazine about his agent's work as an IM. Visited at his hospital bed by longtime friend and companion Rainer Eppelmann, Schnur continued to deny having any connection with the Ministry for State Security. Two days later, the web of lies unraveled. Kohl recalled:

That same day the second-to-last mass rally had already begun in Cottbus, where I was scheduled to speak. The speaker before me was Pastor Oswald Wutzke. I remember him passionately defending Schnur as the victim of malicious slander when, from afar, I saw Diepgen and Neumann—who had just arrived from Berlin—approaching through the crowd. . . . Others in the Bonn CDU had also broken a lance for the DA [Democratic Awakening] chairman, which made it rather difficult to openly admit Schnur's involvement with the Stasi. Of course, we had to do it fast, to cut our losses with a view to the impending elections on Sunday.³

On 15 March the central committee of Democratic Awakening expelled Schnur from the party and elected Rainer Eppelmann as its chairman. Politicians from all parties expressed their consternation. The SPD's leading candidate, Ibrahim Böhme, mindfully pointed out that Schnur had "helped many people in the last fifteen years, advising and defending them."⁴

If Democratic Awakening had stood any chance of winning the election before these revelations, they had certainly lost it afterwards. On the evening of 18 March 1990, they garnered a mere 0.9 percent of the vote. The CDU, by contrast, was the happy winner at the polls, with 40.9 percent. The SPD took a distant second place, with 21.8 percent. Kohl's plans had worked, even without Schnur.

What came as an awkward incident in the final days of the election frenzy in fact turned out to be the harbinger of a new era. For the very first time, newly accessible files put under public control had led to the exposure of prominent unofficial collaborators.

Using anonymous letters and information provided by the defector in January, former full-time employees of the Stasi were harnessing their inside knowledge to deflect public attention away from themselves and their apparatus, in an attempt to shift the spotlight to the unofficial collaborators. Others were trying to take revenge on erstwhile informers, who had severed ties with the Stasi and were now making headway in politics.⁵ Indeed, it was precisely Schnur's new political commitment that presumably provoked MfS officers to expose him in the first place. This tactic was not only lucrative, allowing some of them to cash in on rewards for providing information to the media and Western secret services, but also acted as a smokescreen.⁶

The Rostock revelations provided a second turn of events. It was the first time that news of entanglement in the web of East Germany's State Security had come not from the secret world of intelligence services and defectors, but from the hands of a citizens' committee—that is to say, an institution which, by its own lights, stood for publicity and transparency. With that, the first step had been taken on the special East German path for coming to terms with the legacy of the Communist secret police. The step was as painful as it was instructive. On top of the personal disappointment suffered by Schnur's companions and clients, it is clear in hindsight that irreparable damage was done to the opposition movement.

True, there had always been some suspicions against the ambitious attorney. Bärbel Bohley made no secret of her mistrustfulness, and in the fall of 1989 had refused to work with Democratic Awakening. *Spiegel* correspondent Ulrich Schwarz once confronted Rainer Eppelmann with similar concerns in a private conversation, but Eppelmann defended Schnur. Schnur had actively defended his legal clients and sometimes fervently prayed with them. He had even cried with one of his clients in 1988, when singer-songwriter Stephan Krawczyk broke into tears in pretrial detention upon being informed by Schnur that

his wife, Freya Klier, had also been arrested in connection with the Liebknecht-Luxemburg demonstration. Yet none of this prevented Schnur from meeting with his case officer almost every night while all of this was going on, revealing secret messages and betraying the contents of confidential talks with his clients. He had taken part in countless clandestine meetings of dissidents in the 1980s. Only later did his former companions discover that in this and a number of other cases they were dealing with a person who was leading a strange kind of double life. As Eppelmann later wrote:

Wolfgang Schnur, like many of his fellow IMs, was a conflicted individual. He identified almost completely with his job, to the point of self-abandonment. This destroyed his family. And he was a man with an enormous craving for recognition, validation, and public prestige, who strove to have power over others. He enjoyed consorting with state functionaries and liked when they took his work seriously. Reporting gave him the feeling of exercising power over people.⁷

The thought was certainly not reassuring that this man had come close to becoming head of state of the GDR or at least one of its ministers. It soon became apparent that orderly, public access to the files would be a better way to handle the situation rather than leaving things at the mercy of those who harbored secrets from the past and were now trying to use them for their own purposes. It was no coincidence that the demand soon surfaced for all representatives in the newly elected Volkskammer to be vetted for possible collaboration with the Ministry for State Security. The Volkskammer itself, just a few weeks later, created a legislative framework for opening the files.

The exposure of Schnur was followed by that of many others—some cases just as clear-cut and well documented, others still waiting to be resolved on account of the destruction of files or contradictory evidence. Some IMs approached their friends and colleagues before or after being exposed. Many others did not. Some claimed they had nothing at all to do with the Stasi, whereas others saw themselves as victims. Some saw nothing objectionable about their breach of confidence; others considered themselves middlemen in a dialogue between state and society.

To be sure, it was never only about unmasking MfS employees and their informers. Those who were persecuted or kept under surveillance later had the opportunity to read their files and learn about the measures taken against them. They could see which supposed friend had betrayed them and which individuals secretly suspected of working with “the Firm” had actually refused to collaborate.

The decision of civil-rights activists, the Volkskammer, and later the Bundestag to open the files of the Ministry for State Security was ultimately intended to clear the way for a critical, scholarly assessment of the role and activities of this institution and to inform the public about this. It enabled the workings of the Ministry for State Security to be reconstructed on the basis of its own, largely unfiltered archives. Of course in the winter of 1989–90 the Stasi succeeded in destroying or making off with much of the material (according to more recent estimates, about one-quarter of its files, especially regarding the most recent cases and foreign espionage). But with 111 miles of files from end to end, researchers have an exceptional find at their disposal—even leaving aside the canteen bills and empty forms that make up part of it.

The Stasi as History

This volume was only possible thanks to the decision, unique throughout the world in kind and degree, to open up these secret files. It is based on the research of many dozens of political scientists and historians, interested laypeople and the formerly persecuted who have taken it upon themselves in the intervening decades to work through mountains of paperwork in order to shed some light on this tangle of intrigues. Using this work, I assess some central issues that have emerged in recent scholarly debates about the history of the Ministry for State Security of the German Democratic Republic.

Perhaps the most important result of opening the files is the proof that State Security acted beyond the rule of law and in flagrant disregard of human dignity and civil rights. This proof has been furnished using original evidence from the inner workings of the secret apparatus and is widely acknowledged—even if a handful of old generals and colonels has banded together now and then to vociferously claim the contrary. This is the starting point of this volume. The aim is to better understand the role and function of the MfS as part of the state and society of the GDR and of postwar German history, while pointing to perspectives of further debate and discussion. The general thesis of the following account is summed up by this book's original German title: the "Mielke Concern," which builds on colloquial terms for the Stasi such as "VEB Horch und Guck" (People's Own Enterprise "Listen and Look") or "die Firma" (the Firm). State Security is taken here as a central pillar of the power structure of communism viewed as a historical formation. The self-understanding and methods of this

institution originated in Soviet Stalinism, but it was only during the post-Stalinist phase, starting in 1957, that the MfS developed into a “mixed concern” (*Gemischtwarenkonzern*) for security issues, into a “general enterprise for power maintenance and repression” that extended well beyond its classic secret-police and intelligence-gathering functions of the initial years.⁸ The breadth and variety of tasks the MfS assumed over the years and the depth of its penetration into all spheres of society resulted in its exceptionally strong position in the East German party-state.

The widely branching apparatus with its varied concrete tasks was held together inwardly by the elitist self-understanding of its employees, who viewed themselves as “Chekists”—that is to say, as successors to the revolutionary “Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage” (abbreviated in Russian as Cheka), founded in 1917 by the Russian Bolsheviks. As part of this tradition, the ideological mission of the MfS was to secure the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and protect it from all forms of enemy attack via a covertly operating executive organ invested with state instruments of force. Chekism ensured its legitimacy as a militant class warrior on a global and national (in the German case, dual-state) scale. This will to fight with the aid of a “special machine of suppression”⁹ had gone from being a potentially reversible means to an end in the Soviet Union of the 1930s, something that would gradually “wither away” alongside the state in the utopian perspective, to a self-perpetuating institution, a given of the Communist system.

The potential for repression strongly influenced social relations in state-socialist society. In the early years, manifest physical violence was an offensive instrument for shaping society in the period of Communist transformation. Once the system was consolidated, repression mainly served to secure positions of power. This was also true—at least for the threat of repression—in later years, years we now know had caused Party leaders and the strategists of State Security monumental headaches, embarking as they had on a sociopolitical path fraught with deep and varied contradictions between a form of rule propped up by force and the ever more urgent need to modernize and adapt.

There has yet to be a systematic analysis of the role of the MfS in state and society beyond the studies of its general significance as the “shield and sword of the Party” within the apparatus of domination. In particular, the sociopsychological effects of its activity in the immediate social context of family and friends, neighbors, and coworkers have not yet been sufficiently investigated. The public debate in

Germany alone and even more so the strong emotions that the catchword “Stasi” triggers in almost every East German are an indication of the extent to which State Security was always close at hand, in both subjective and objective terms.

This book will likewise address the wholesale claims that the MfS controlled virtually everything, calling the shots and manipulating at will, both during the GDR’s existence and after its demise, within its borders and outside as well, or—conversely—that it was an insignificant part of the system of rule, of little import for the “real lives” of common people, and ultimately not worth investigating. Rather, I would like to show and to argue that State Security was indeed of great importance for the history of the GDR and the people who lived it—as a direct and indirect factor, as a social, political and economic agent, as a calculated risk, or as an instrument exploitable for personal gain, with intended or unintended consequences.

My account begins with the formative period of East German State Security through 1956, when it was still under a strong Soviet hand. It was during this phase of Stalinism “draped in the colors of the GDR” that the MfS apparatus took shape inside and outside, permanently forming its perception of the world and the enemy. Chapters two through six are thematically oriented, covering the period from the aborted de-Stalinization of 1956 into the 1980s. These five chapters will illustrate the effects of Stasi “corporate expansion” in its main spheres of activity, as well as the political and social consequences thereof. Special emphasis will be placed on the structural development of the apparatus and its full-time employees. The unofficial informers will be viewed against the backdrop of recent historical research into the phenomenon of denunciation, while addressing the consequences of the Stasi’s mission to provide pervasive security and exploring the real extent and effects of surveillance of the whole of East German society. The classic secret-police struggle against the internal opposition in the GDR will be investigated alongside the Stasi’s varied Western and foreign-intelligence work.

The book is rounded off by some thoughts on the circumstances and conditions surrounding the surprisingly quiet collapse of SED rule and the MfS apparatus in the fall of 1989, while addressing some of the burdens that continue to plague reunified Germany. A comprehensive overview of the history of the Ministry for State Security of the GDR is not yet possible due to the disparate state of current scholarship in many areas and the lack of historical perspective in general, which is to say, the still very recent nature of the events in question. My account attempts, here and there, to bridge the gap—character-

istic of much historical research—between the history of SED power structures and of GDR society on the whole. The actual depth of the MfS's penetration in East German society plays an important role here, as do its echoes at the grassroots of society which reverberated back to the apparatus and affected its course of action.

This volume is indebted to countless discussions with colleagues and friends, who for reasons of space cannot be mentioned here by name. I profited enormously from discussions held at in-house research colloquia of the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Archives, as well as at the colloquium on East German and Eastern European history led by Christoph Klessmann, Axel Schildt, and Bernhard Schalhorn. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Clemens Vollnhals, who encouraged me to write this book; to Helmut Müller-Enbergs, who shared his endless knowledge of unofficial collaborators and MfS operations in the West with me; to Roger Engelmann and Walter Süß, who read the manuscript and offered constructive criticism; and to Stefan Meyer from my German publisher, DVA, who gently and patiently prodded me on.

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