

police functions of K-5 and enjoyed wide-ranging powers for combating the class enemy. Yet more organisational changes led to the dissolution of K-5 in August 1949 and the transfer of numerous functions to Department D of the Criminal Police. The new ministry, whose creation was approved unanimously by what was still the provisional parliament or *Volkskammer* in February 1950, consisted of the HVzSV, sections of the former Department for Intelligence and Information, the Criminal Police and the Main Department Political Culture. The new Ministry of State Security was not subject to control or supervision by the GDR parliament and, although an organ of the Council of Ministers, its true masters were the officers of the KGB. Each head of a Stasi service unit was responsible to Soviet instructors who kept an eye on activities and stepped in when necessary.²⁶ In the early 1950s, the KGB employed 2,200 staff who performed the latter tasks as well as their own secret service work. After Stalin's death, Beria reduced the number to 328, only for the target figure to be increased to 458 after his own fall from power.²⁷

²⁶ Gieseke J. 1998: 12.

²⁷ Gieseke J. 2001: 58; Otto W. 2000: 128.

THE MINISTRY OF STATE SECURITY, 1950–71

THE SHARP SWORD

The law on the Ministry of State Security was terse and deliberately uninformative, its two short paragraphs amounting to little more than an announcement of the formation of the new body. On the other hand, the Minister of the Interior, Karl Steinhoff, was a little more forthcoming when he told the *Volkskammer*, on 8 February 1950, that the ministry's main task was: 'to protect the people's own enterprises and works, transport and the people's own property against the plots of criminal elements as well as against all attacks, to conduct a decisive fight against the activity of enemy agents, subversives, saboteurs and spies, to conduct an energetic fight against bandits, to protect our democratic development and to ensure uninterrupted fulfilment of the economic plans of our peace economy'.¹

Although Steinhoff had once been a Social Democrat, his speech resonated with the militancy of the old KPD. The address also underscored the Stasi's role as one of the SED's key instruments in the Stalinisation of East German politics and society, a process which had been set in motion in 1947–48. This entailed the emasculation of the other political parties, notably the CDU and the LDPD, the subjugation of the large mass organisations such as the Free German Youth and the Confederation of Free German Trade Unions (FDGB), the transformation of the SED into a monolithic, hierarchical body on the model of the CPSU, and the assertion of the party's dominance over an increasingly centralised economy and administration. Nor were SED members spared the pain of the party's transition into a Marxist-Leninist party. A series of expulsions and purges which lasted between 1948 and 1953 turned the SED into a more disciplined and 'ideologically pure' party and strengthened the position of those Communists such as Ulbricht and Pieck who had spent much of the Nazi era in Moscow. The main targets for expulsion from the party were former SPD members and non-conformist Communists. The

¹ Cited in Gieseke J. 1998: 9–10. Our translation.

MfS was active in the purging of the SED and the other political parties as well as in securing the state from hostile groups in the West and their helpers in the GDR. The Western bodies included RIAS, the Organisation of Independent Lawyers and the Eastern Bureau of political parties such as the SPD and the CDU.² The paranoia ran so deep that inside the GDR even the small community of Jehovah's Witnesses was banned in 1950 on the absurd pretext that they were associated with Western secret services (see Chapter 10).

The reconstruction of the political system, together with the restructuring of the economy and society, had made sufficient progress from the point of view of the SED leaders for Ulbricht, with Soviet approval, to announce at the 1952 party conference that the GDR could now proceed with the 'planned construction of socialism'. Whereas the economy had come increasingly under central control by means of an elaborate planning mechanism and through the nationalisation of many sectors of the economy,³ the SED had been reluctant to press ahead with the collectivisation of agriculture as it was so closely associated in people's minds with the millions of victims during the famine in the Soviet Union in 1932-33. Nevertheless, shortly after its party conference, the SED decided to accelerate its controversial collectivisation programme in agriculture at the same time as it introduced artisans' production cooperatives. Many farmers and artisans were summoned before the courts on trumped-up charges of committing crimes against the economy.⁴ All this was part of a general campaign against the old social order, which also encompassed an intensification of pressure against the Protestant churches and the education sector. In addition, in 1952, a 5-kilometre-wide prohibited zone was created between the GDR and the FRG, the armed forces entered on a period of rapid expansion, the development of heavy industry was accelerated and the five *Länder* were dissolved and replaced by 15 Regional Administrations (*Bezirke*). In order to pay for this ambitious programme, deep cuts were made in the social budgets in early 1953 and, in May, wages were squeezed and ration cards withdrawn from 2 million people. In June, a sharp increase in work norms was announced for implementation at the end of the month, a measure which was tantamount to cuts in the real wages of workers of between 25 per cent and 30 per cent. So strong was popular discontent that the GDR stood on the verge of implosion.

The Stasi had made its own distinctive contribution to the 'construction of socialism' at a time, according to Ulbricht, of a sharpening of the class struggle. As yet, the SED Central Committee apparatus and the SED organisation in the Stasi were too underdeveloped to keep a firm grip on the MfS; however, the ministry worked closely with the Central Party Control

² Mählert U. 1998: 351-424.

³ In 1948, the publicly-owned sector of the economy already accounted for 61 per cent of the gross product of the Soviet zone.

⁴ Gieseke J. 2001: 51.

Commission in the purges of the party membership. The most notable victim was the former Politbüro member, Paul Merker, who was arrested by the MfS in 1952 after being mentioned in the so-called confession of Rudolf Slansky, the ex-General Secretary of the Czech Communist Party. Although Merker was not a Jew, his advocacy of Jewish interests and his solidarity with the Jewish victims of Nazism had brought him into conflict with the party at a time when anti-semitism was gathering momentum in the Soviet Union after the discovery of an alleged plot by predominantly Jewish doctors. The preparations for Merker's trial in the GDR had strong anti-semitic tones. During the interrogations conducted by the Stasi, Merker was mocked as the 'King of the Jews' and as a 'slave of the Jews'. He was spared a show trial by Stalin's timely death and was released in 1956.⁵ The Stasi cast a long shadow: between August and December 1952, 1,476 persons were arrested in arbitrary fashion; and confessions were forced by means of constant interrogation and other brutal methods.⁶

Despite its active role in enforcing the rapid transformation of society, the MfS was far from being the omnipresent conglomerate of the GDR's final two decades. While the ministry's full-time staff had grown quickly from about 1,100 in 1950 to 8,800 in 1952 and it acquired ever more powers, staffing problems were legion. Not only was staff turnover high, but many officers were ill-equipped for the demands of secret police work. Most were recruited from among young members of the SED and the FDJ who came from a proletarian and unprivileged background. Flight to the West was not uncommon.⁷

THE JUNE 1953 UPRISING

The popular uprising, which erupted on the streets of East Berlin on 17 June 1953 and quickly spread to most other cities of the GDR, was a traumatic shock for both the SED and the MfS, even though they had been aware of the widespread dissatisfaction with the Communist attack on the old order. Stasi District Service Unit buildings were occupied by demonstrators in Bitterfeld, Görlitz, Jena, Merseburg and Nisky, and prisoners released from jail. The uprising was soon crushed by the Soviet forces. In their wake, the MfS hunted down demonstrators; by 7 July, it had arrested 4,816 persons.⁸ Although Communist rule survived and Ulbricht managed to outmanoeuvre his critics on the Politbüro and the Central Committee, the Stasi had a high

⁵ Gieseke J. 2001: 52-3.

⁶ Gieseke J. 1998: 11-12.

⁷ About 400 existing and ex-staff fled to the West before the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961: 108 returned through the use of force and trickery; seven of them were executed and the others received long jail sentences. See Gieseke J. 2001: 55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

price to pay for what Minister President Otto Grotewohl referred to as its failure to protect the state against enemy subversion and agents and its ignorance of the planned putsch.⁹ It was downgraded to a State Secretariat and, on 18 July, Zaisser fell victim to the political infighting.

Zaisser's replacement was Ernst Wollweber, whom the Soviets favoured over Ulbricht's preferred choice, Erich Mielke. Wollweber (1898–1967)¹⁰ was a KPD activist, having joined the party in 1919, served as one of its regional M-Leaders and had been imprisoned in 1924–26. His period as a Reichstag deputy was cut short by Hitler's accession to power. During the Third Reich, he organised sabotage operations against German, Italian and Japanese shipping. Arrested in Sweden in 1940, he spent the next four years in custody. After his release, he became a Soviet citizen and resided in the Soviet Union until his return to Germany in 1946. Before his appointment as State Secretary of the Stasi, he held high office in maritime and transport agencies and in the Ministry of the Interior.

Despite the setbacks of 1953, the Stasi's role as a spearhead of the socialist revolution remained intact and it recovered its ministerial status two years later. In the first of a series of actions against Western agencies such as the Gehlen Organisation and the Eastern Bureau of the SPD, 'Action Firework', launched in October 1953, led to the arrest of several hundred alleged agents. Soviet instructors played a key role in the planning and implementation of these measures. As a result of 'Action Firework' and similar campaigns, an estimated 600 to 700 persons were abducted from the West, including 120 of the 400 or so MfS staff who had fled the GDR. One of the Stasi's victims was the journalist Karl Wilhelm Fricke, who was seized in West Berlin in 1955.¹¹ After his release from prison, he would become West Germany's leading expert on the Stasi.

DESTALINISATION

Wielding the sword in this manner became less appropriate when, in February 1956, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev initiated a process of deStalinisation with his denunciation of the personality cult and the terroristic methods of Stalin. Although Ulbricht attempted to limit the damage inflicted by these revelations on his own political position and the fragile GDR, he failed to halt the spread of revisionist ideas among students and intellectuals such as the philosopher Wolfgang Harich and the head of the *Aufbau* publishing house, Walter Janka. The political temperature was also raised by the spread of revisionist ideas from neighbouring Poland and Hungary. Wollweber,

⁹ Otto W. 2000: 198.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 200–201. For a good biographical sketch of Wollweber, see Childs D. and Popplewell R. 1999: 28–32.

¹¹ Gieseke J. 2001: 63–4; Otto W. 2000: 214.

though no liberal in Stasi clothing, regarded Ulbricht's line as tactically misguided and introduced a milder regime in the Stasi prisons. He also aimed to reduce staffing levels by 10 to 20 per cent. Not only did he disagree with Ulbricht over how to approach deStalinisation and over Harich's treatment as a counterrevolutionary but they also clashed bitterly over Wollweber's intention to restrict the SED leadership's access to Stasi internal data, including confidential Stasi reports on popular discontent. Wollweber, it seems, feared another uprising unless the party took action.¹² Ulbricht gradually reduced Wollweber's influence, adroitly using the KGB's dislike of the minister and of the seismic shock of the Hungarian Uprising in November 1956 to brand as revisionists Wollweber and critics of the First Secretary such as Karl Schirdewan. Wollweber was dismissed on 1 November 1957 and ejected from the SED Central Committee in January 1958. For the next decade, Ulbricht was the unchallenged leader of the SED, supported by a loyal, highly ambitious lieutenant and arch-Stalinist, the new Minister of State Security, Erich Mielke. The latter's Stalinist mode of thinking and language permeates his many speeches. Take his address in June 1951 to MfS colleagues regarding the establishment of the MfS: 'The GDR created the sword of the revolution, as comrade Lenin called the organs of the Stasi in the USSR, for repelling spies, saboteurs, subversives, terrorists and other enemies'.¹³

PEN, SWORD AND SHIELD

Over the next decade, Mielke, who was both arch-bureaucrat and Communist bruiser, presided over the Stasi's evolution from an already extensive instrument of Stalinist persecution into a vast apparatus of surveillance and repression. It was not, however, the highly intrusive body of later decades; for instance, in 1957, it did not even possess its own telephone network.¹⁴ Although Ulbricht undoubtedly was Mielke's superior and although Mielke never tired of stressing the Stasi's role as the sword and shield of the SED, the minister was allergic to what he deemed to be unwarranted interference in his domain (see Chapter 3). An incident in 1959 illustrates the delicacy of SED–MfS relations in operational matters. When Schulz, the SED Party Secretary of the MfS Guard Regiment, informed a member of Honecker's Central Committee Department for Security Questions of an incident in the regiment, Mielke was furious. Insisting that he should have been informed first, he stressed that security matters were managed by him personally and the First Secretary (Ulbricht) and, massaging his own ego, he asked: 'Am I

¹² von Flocken J. and Scholz M. F. 1994: 182–98; Grieder P. 1999: 133–4; Otto W. 2000: 232–3.

¹³ Cited in Otto W. 2000: 150. Our translation.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.

not a member of the Party? I am an elected member of the CC'.¹⁵ He conveniently forget to mention his failure to enter the Politbüro, although in 1960 he did become one of the founder members of the National Defence Council, the umbrella organisation for the GDR's defence and security forces.

Opportunities abounded for the MfS to extend its influence, especially as the SED leadership began to switch the emphasis from surveillance of Western secret services and underground groups towards oppositional forces at home. Influenced by the ideas and agents of imperialism, the latter were allegedly undermining and subverting the GDR and other members of the socialist camp as well as striving to get rid of the SED's self-designated role as the leading force in society. The MfS referred to this method as political-ideological diversion. Among the ministry's main responsibilities were the liquidation of revisionist groups, the protection of military installations and industrial plant, the enforcement of the collectivisation of the land and stemming the mass exodus from the republic: 143,917 fled to the West in 1959, 199,188 in 1960 and 155,402 by 12 August 1961. With the GDR in danger of imploding, a reluctant Khrushchev agreed to Ulbricht's demands for the sectoral borders in Berlin to be closed by the building of the Berlin Wall, an event welcomed by Mielke.¹⁶ The construction of the Wall was followed by a wave of repression to force the East German population to accept the new political realities. A sharp rise in the number of arrests and sentences was one of the consequences of the terror campaign. The MfS and the People's Police, it is estimated, were responsible for 6,041 arrests between the building of the Wall and 4 September 1961. In the second half of the year, 18,297 persons were sentenced for crimes against the state.¹⁷

THE PRAGUE SPRING

The next major wave of repression occurred during the Prague Spring in 1968. In the eyes of Ulbricht and the Soviet leader, Brezhnev, the reforms were not simply a matter for the Czechs and Slovaks but also posed a serious threat to their own rule as well as to the Communist power monopoly. As early as May 1968, Mielke was attacking what he regarded as counterrevolutionary events and insisting that the socialist camp would never allow Czechoslovakia to defect.¹⁸ The SED leaders' fears were quickened by the positive reception of the Prague reforms among broad sections of the East German population. Although the GDR National People's Army did not participate in the Warsaw Pact's invasion in August 1968, the troops helped to seal the Czech-East German border. After the invasion, the Stasi assisted its

¹⁵ Otto W. 2000: 284.

¹⁶ Ibid., 299.

¹⁷ Figures in Gieseke J. 2001: 75; Werkentin F. 1995: 268.

¹⁸ Otto W. 2000: 331.

Czechoslovak counterparts in purging reformers from among their ranks. Within the GDR itself, the MfS was actively involved in the suppression of demonstrations and protests against the invasion. Harsh disciplinary measures were imposed on the protesters and the number of sentences imposed by the courts increased sharply.

THE MfS AS SOCIETAL CONTROLLER

Yet, as is apparent from a speech in December 1961, even Mielke appreciated that the high level of arrests after the erection of the Berlin Wall could not continue without jeopardising SED rule.¹⁹ A second bout of deStalinisation launched by Khrushchev in October 1961 reinforced this conclusion, as did the SED's efforts to reach a rapprochement with the population now that the escape route via Berlin had been closed. As part of Ulbricht's search for a consensus with the population, a controlled reform of the command economy was introduced in 1963 under the banner of the New Economic System of Planning and Management. Not only were higher living standards promised but mass and top-level sport was promoted and the family and youth were wooed through new concessions. The result of these and other developments was, somewhat perversely, an increase in the range of areas which the Stasi was called upon to tackle, an opportunity which Mielke was only too happy to seize. The network of Stasi agents, including Officers on Special Assignments (OibEs), was expanded and the Stasi assumed responsibility for passport control at the GDR borders. In 1958, the MfS had issued its second guidelines on work with spies on the home front. They were defined as the 'main means' (*Hauptmittel*) for waging the struggle against a broad spectrum of enemies, including foreign secret services, 'demagogic elements and persons with the lowest qualities of character'.²⁰ The various types of informers mentioned in the document – for example, secret co-workers, secret informers on special assignments and occupants of apartments used for conspiratorial meetings – anticipated similar categories in later guidelines and underscored the fact that the MfS was already a long way along the path towards a comprehensive surveillance of society.

Wollweber's aspiration to reduce staffing levels fell victim to his successor's ambitions to enlarge his secret police and security empire. At the same time, the KGB reduced its direct involvement in MfS affairs. In 1958, its advisers were cut back to 32 contact officers, although it did retain its foreign intelligence branch in Berlin-Karlshorst until 1990.²¹ The ministry's full-time staff rose from 17,400 in 1957 to 45,500 in 1971; the central departments were the main beneficiaries. Contributions from the state budget soared to feed

¹⁹ Werkentin F. 1995: 271.

²⁰ Müller-Enbergs H. 1996: 197, 199.

²¹ Gieseke J. 1998: 20.

this expansion and existing departments were merged and fresh ones materialised to cope with the volume of work. Growth occurred not only in new areas such as passport control but also in branches with the classic functions of observation and interrogation – Main Departments VIII and IX. Main Department XX was expanded in 1969 when Department 7 was created for cultural policy, a reflection of the SED's concern over the appeal of the Prague Spring for the East German cultural intelligentsia.²² The expansion did not go unchallenged. In 1962, as part of the SED's search for a milder approach, the head of the SED Central Control Commission, Hermann Matern, advocated a contraction of the ministry on the grounds that it was exceeding its brief and fomenting popular unrest by its illegal arrests and house searches. Coming from the SED's inquisitor-general, this was the height of hypocrisy.²³

A NEW LEADER

When Erich Honecker became First Secretary in 1971, he inherited from his predecessor a vast apparatus of repression. He also inherited Mielke, with whom he had conspired to overthrow the veteran Ulbricht. Ulbricht's grip on power had been slackening since the late 1960s as a result of his faltering economic reform programme, his ill-health and disagreements with Brezhnev over the East German leader's criticism of Moscow's failure to assert what in Ulbricht's eyes were the GDR's vital interests in negotiations with the USA and the FRG. Ulbricht's highly conservative critics in the Politbüro, notably the ambitious crown prince, Honecker, conspired, with Brezhnev's somewhat reluctant approval, to pension off Ulbricht. Mielke, appreciating in which direction the political wind was blowing and also fearful that Ulbricht's pursuit of an agreement with the FRG threatened the stability of the GDR, threw in his lot with Honecker. His reward would be promotion to the Politbüro.²⁴

The new party leader was born in the Saarland in 1912 and stemmed from a working-class family with strong KPD associations. The young Honecker joined the KPD in 1929, soon developed a reputation as an activist, and spent a training year at Moscow's Young Communist International School in the early 1930s. After the Nazis came to power, he was involved in underground activities in Berlin, the Ruhr and the Saarland. Arrested by the Nazis in 1935, Honecker was sentenced in 1937 to ten years' imprisonment in the Brandenburg-Görlen jail. His early political experiences convinced him of the iniquities of the capitalist system and reinforced his belief in Soviet-style

socialism as the society of the future, a belief to which, like Mielke, he stubbornly adhered throughout his political life. After the end of the Third Reich, he soon ascended the political ladder, becoming chairman of the Free German Youth Organisation in 1946, entering the SED Politbüro as a candidate member in 1950, and occupying the key post of Central Committee Secretary for Security between 1958 and 1971.

Honecker's early years as leader of state and party were associated with the West's diplomatic recognition of the GDR and a more sustained attempt than under Ulbricht to woo the East German population by higher living standards and heavy state subsidies for rents, housing construction, transportation, basic foodstuffs and pre-school care. The period of relative prosperity and political stability began to fade towards the end of the 1970s under the twin pressures of the onset of a new ice-age in relations between the USA and the USSR and of the international economic turbulence arising from the oil crisis. However, Honecker was able to contain political dissent at home – thanks in no small part to the Stasi – and, through careful negotiations with Chancellors Helmut Schmidt and Helmut Kohl, to establish a mini-détente in German–German relations. Although the warmer relationship between the two Germanies aroused the ire of the Soviet leadership, it had the advantage of facilitating West German financial injections to help prop up the ailing East German economy and it enabled Honecker to play the role of international statesman. The culmination of this process was his visit to the Federal Republic in September 1987. While the visit appeared to be a clear demonstration of the independence and sovereignty of the GDR, both Honecker and his party would soon be swept from power. Gorbachev's accession to the post of General Secretary of the CPSU in 1985 was a last chance for the communist world to arrest the economic and political decay into which it had fallen, but his reforms and his rethinking of relations with the West, which called into question the continuation of the GDR as a separate state, encountered only obstruction from dogmatic and ageing rulers like Honecker and Ceaușescu. A combination of Soviet weakness, the conservatives' opposition to fundamental change and the allure of the West precipitated the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communist rule in East Germany in 1989. The Stasi and Mielke would not be spared the fate of the party and its leader.

²² Gieseke J. 2001: 80–82; Otto W. 2000: 341.

²³ Gieseke J. 2001: 77–8; Otto W. 2000: 310–12.

²⁴ Dennis M. 2000: 127, 134–8; Otto W. 2000: 347–9.