Chapter Eleven

The honeycomb state: The benign and malign diffusion of power

The boundaries of the state in the GDR are harder to define than one might at first think. The real fissures ran, not so much *between* 'regime' and 'people', but rather *within* the very large complex of Party and state functionaries, only a small fraction of whom can be held to be genuinely members of an elite or 'ruling class'. What is really quite remarkable about the GDR is the way in which extraordinarily large numbers of people were involved in its functioning, who were implicated in a complex web of micro-relationships of power in every area of life, serving to reproduce and transform the system. Very large numbers of people acted as honorary functionaries in a wide range of organisations, in a manner that, by the 1970s and '80s, was more or less taken for granted by a very significant proportion of the population. They participated in and sustained the system; they took on, embodied and enacted roles, and played within the rules and parameters of the system; yet their participation in the micro-structures of power, while very often conferring on them privileges and opportunities as individuals, did not serve to displace their class positions as defined by the occupational structure.

Closely related are questions concerning the ways in which the character and shape of the 'state' changed over forty years. Far from 'withering away', as Marx envisaged might happen in his dream of pure communism, the state grew enormously in the 'actually existing socialism' of the GDR. But it grew in two quite different ways. On the one hand, ever larger numbers of people participated in the broader formal and informal political systems of the GDR, thus serving to 'normalise' the initially strange and forcibly imposed structures of power. On the other hand, while perhaps decreasingly obvious in everyday life, the repressive and malign aspects of the exercise of power through the practices of the Stasi also grew exponentially. With the expansion of the state, processes of normalisation and enhanced means of surveillance and repression went hand in hand.

There are, therefore, a whole set of questions concerning the diffusion and variety of forms of power; and it is crucial to distinguish between repressive, coercive and manipulative means of exerting power, and more routine, widely accepted methods, which were 'carried' by increasing numbers of people with barely a second thought. To use Max Weber's terminology, the balance between 'power', in the sense of the 'capacity to exert one's will against the will of others', and 'authority', in the sense that commands are likely to be obeyed (for whatever combination of reasons), is more complex than at first one might think. In the GDR, from perhaps the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, the two aspects grew hand in hand. It was only with the growing economic and related political crises in the whole Soviet bloc in the mid- to later 1980s that ever more people began openly to question the fragile consensus that had, at least among significant numbers of citizens, been growing in the course of the 1970s; and even the enhanced domestic power of repression was not sufficient to shore up the fragile system of authority in the altered international circumstances of autumn 1989.

These partially contradictory, or at least simultaneous and very different aspects of the growth of the East German state, are crucial for understanding the people's paradox. It was possible both to have participated in the structures of power, and yet simultaneously to have been openly critical of the regime – even well before 1989. It was possible both to have participated in the structures of power, and still not have been part of the ruling elite. It was possible, in other words, to have occupied a position that was simultaneously located in 'state' and 'society': in the extended 'societal state', a system sustained through myriad micro-relationships of extended power and authority, the dichotomy between 'state' and 'society' simply does not hold up; the battle lines are more complex and difficult to delineate.

Implicated and committed? The participatory system at the grass roots

Implausibly large numbers – perhaps one in six of the population – were involved in one way or another in what might be called the micro-systems of power through which GDR society worked. This system cannot be described in terms of an extended 'state' that was 'doing something' to a 'society' conceived of as separate from the 'state': rather it was the very way society as a whole was structured. Life in the GDR, in just about every respect – including not only the obvious areas of the economy or the education system, but also housing and leisure – was organised in ways that were at the same time dependent on central policy decisions and on the practices of innumerable

people who were active participants in the maintenance and functioning of the system on the ground.

There were perhaps as many as 300,000–400,000 key functionaries, or around 3 per cent of the adult population, 'who played a really important role in the exercise and securing of power', and a very much larger group still of between one to two million adults overall – perhaps around 8–16 per cent of the adult population – who played a significant role as a functionary in one or more of the mass organisations, political parties and regional and local representative institutions such as the Stasi, the Army and the People's Police (Volkspolizei), and the state administrative and economic apparatus.[1] Beyond this, there were numerous citizens who took up occasional positions as honorary functionaries on behalf of one or another 'good cause', such as cultural activities in factories or helping with children and young people in holiday camps or youth clubs; and a rather more shadowy but highly significant figure of those who cooperated as 'unofficial informers' for the Stasi. To lump all these together as part of the 'political elite' would be utterly wrong; to castigate all of them indiscriminately as 'perpetrators' or 'accomplices' or 'fellow travellers' would also be inappropriate. Even to try to call them all representatives of the 'state', rather than members of 'society', would be to make an artificial distinction that does not adequately depict the situation on the ground. They were of course essential to the 'functioning of the regime', but it has in some way also to be understood that, perhaps from the 1960s onwards, this was increasingly a matter of the way GDR society worked, in a very banal and day-to-day manner. Large numbers of people over time became involved in the system, in one way or another, almost as a matter of course.

There were quite simply an enormous number of functions that could be occupied by persons in a very wide range of social positions. For example, a study carried out in March 1960 of 252 teachers in 17 schools found that, between these 252 teachers, there were no fewer than 374 functions. Only 61 teachers held no functionary position at all, while 184 held between one and four functions each; four held five functionary positions, one had six, and a poor two teachers each had as many as seven different functionary positions to juggle in their 'free time'.[2] This commitment to the exercise of social functions was on top of workloads in their primary occupation as teacher ranging from between 43.5 hours per week at the lowest end to over 110 hours claimed at the highest end. Functions included positions in a variety of relevant organisations, among which the most important were the FDJ and Pioneer organisations for young people and children (57); the National Front (27); the German Society for Gymnastics and Sport (DTSB, 15); the German–Soviet

Friendship Society (DSF, 10); the Democratic Women's League of Germany (DFD, 10), as well as a variety of other social and pedagogical organisations.

Functionary positions were far from being the prerogative of particular social groups such as teachers, already in a position of some authority. Rather, they were spread across every organisation and covered every area of life. In December 1979, it was estimated that over 650,000 (28 per cent) of the then 2,300,000 members of the FDJ, covering the full range of sixteen to twenty-five year olds, held a functionary position. Nor did being a functionary necessarily entail complete political or ideological commitment. A study of FDJ members in the districts (*Bezirke*) of Karl-Marx-Stadt, Leipzig, Magdeburg, Berlin, Erfurt and Dresden, who were already employed rather than still being students, found that fewer than half (44 per cent) of those holding functionary positions in the FDJ were members of the SED; and that while the proportion of those who were explicitly committed to the official 'worldview' of atheism was declining, the number of those who were either definitely religious or agnostic was rising. Less than one in five of these functionaries was *not* involved in any other organisations and societal activities; one quarter were involved in at least three or four other organisations, and fully one quarter held at least one other functionary position in another organisation.[3] Whichever area one looks at – trade union organisation in factories, the committees running collective farms (LPGs), the honorary helpers of the People's Police – there were innumerable possibilities for engaging in service to the community on the part of ordinary people in all walks of life.

People became involved for all sorts of reasons, including a genuine desire to help with, for example, the work of a local club for children or the equivalent of a parent–teacher organisation in a school. But there was more to the functionary system in the GDR than simply the concept of 'active citizenship' that inspired much similar paid or voluntary work in Western societies at this time. There was also to some degree an unwritten pact, or informal understanding, that active commitment to the GDR system as evidenced by societal engagement and particularly service as a functionary would be 'rewarded' with small privileges and opportunities in a situation characterised by scarcity. This becomes very evident when one looks at letters from citizens who were frustrated in some way in the achievement of particular goals, or whose expectations, which they had assumed to be fully justified, had not been met. It is in these 'breaks' in the unspoken agreement that the nature of the latter can be most clearly perceived. Needs ranged from gardens, holidays and housing, to pensions and other perks. When resources were insufficient to meet the full spectrum of demand – as they virtually always were – then appeals would be made to the active contribution an individual had made to the system as a major reason why the satisfaction of their needs should take precedence over those of others. And from the official side, those seen as the 'deserving' and the actively committed took priority over more passive citizens with fewer perceived needs, dependants or claims to reward.

Thus, for example, in the summer of 1975 one Frau Hildegard B. of Magdeburg was desperate to buy a small allotment garden in which she and her husband could relax.[4] Having agreed a price of 2,000 Marks for a suitable garden, she was shocked when it was suddenly put up to 3,300 Marks. The shock was all the greater because she had been waiting endlessly for a garden, had constantly been informed that she was next in line for the next suitable garden to become vacant, and each time one did come up it was given to someone else. Her letter – long, hand-written on square exercise book paper – lists all her contributions to the system over many years until retirement: 'as a comrade [*Genossin*, or SED party member] and for years Chair of the Factory Trade Union Executive Committee', as someone whose children are also now 'comrades and functionaries', and who has been active in a socialist brigade, held innumerable functions and has received all sorts of honours (*Auszeichnungen*) for her services to the system. It ends on a rather sarcastic, bitter note: 'But just a garden for well-deserved relaxation, a garden that would be looked after and tended lovingly, that we don't deserve.'[5] Interestingly, the letter in response to Frau B.'s complaint from the Chair of the Magdeburg District section of the Verband der Kleingärtner, Siedler und Kleintierzüchter (Association of Small Gardeners, Settlers and Small Animal Breeders) explaining the priorities determining decisions in allotting gardens, confirms the underlying principle of privileging those who actively contribute to the system, but in his case the potential future contribution appeared to weigh more heavily than reward for past contributions. Those who, from Frau B.'s point of view, had 'jumped the queue' included: 'a family with two children, the husband an *Aktivist* several times over, who already while he was waiting following his application contributed actively to common tasks in the branch'; and an 'agricultural specialist with a diploma, who has worked for the GDR in Africa, and who declared himself prepared to contribute to the branch in the capacity of specialist [*Fachwart*], which we were looking for.'[6] In the end, Frau B.'s claims were recognised by Dr Fritz Rösel of the National Executive Committee (Bundesvorstand) of the FDGB, to whom her original letter had been addressed; and she was offered the opportunity to obtain a garden in a different branch where the underlying 'misunderstandings' giving rise to her complaint would not prove an uncomfortable social legacy.

Similarly, Herr Werner L., forced into early retirement because of silicosis acquired through working in the Wismut uranium mines, and seeking an

additional pension of 100 Marks a month, does not simply rest his case on the rules for retirement on medical grounds caused by work-related illness. He points out that while employed at the Wismut mines he was a member of the 'workers' militia' (*Kampfgruppe*) from 1952; that he was subsequently a functionary in the paramilitary Society for Sport and Technology (Gesellschaft für Sport und Technik, GST); and that he still sees it as his 'duty to our youth to continue to prepare them thoroughly for their tasks in the National People's Army and the defence system', believing that in this way he can 'also help to contribute an important foundation for the construction and protection of our Republic'.[7] Another former Wismut worker, Herr Kuno S. of Gera, is keen to have a special holiday to celebrate his silver wedding, and he and his wife have set their hearts on a trip to Yugoslavia. In his letter appealing to the FDGB Executive Committee about difficulties arising with the permission for this trip, he points out that for 22 years he has held 'major official functionary positions in the Youth Association and in the Party'.[8]

Those who had not made the necessary contribution to GDR society by even formal membership in, let alone active service to, a relevant organisation might find themselves quite simply excluded from any of the benefits and privileges such commitment could bring. Thus the unfortunate parents of Herr Bernd W., despite now being pensioners, were not entitled to enjoy a holiday in FDGB holiday homes even in the depths of the low season when many spaces were available, because in their earlier employment they had not even been members of the FDGB.[9]

Failure to obtain desired goals might elicit a veiled threat of withdrawal of goodwill and 'resignation' from the implicit compact. Frau Angela J., an employee of the Schwerin radio station seeking in October 1989 more flexible working hours to help with childcare duties (and clearly unaware of the historic changes about to overwhelm the GDR), makes this generally tacit understanding quite explicit:

> In all the years I have been employed in the radio station, I have never shied away from being actively involved in societal work for my enterprise. I was for years the FDJ Secretary, and since 1986 I have been working with the Party Leadership in our branch organisation. I have just been elected as the Chair of the Parents' Committee (*Elternaktiv*). I do not wish unduly to make too much of my societal activities, but nevertheless I do expect some sort of reciprocation. If personal interests are not taken into consideration by the enterprise, then the motivation to be socially active decreases markedly.[10]

The vast majority of these functionaries were, for a variety of reasons, exercising their (extended) power in order, at least as they saw it, to do something

for people: to contribute to what they conceived of as the public good. The same could not unequivocally be said about those who cooperated with the secret State Security Service, the Stasi: they, by contrast, were exercising or facilitating the power to do things *to* people. And what was being done to others was generally without their knowledge, certainly without their consent, not in their expressed interests, and very often actively to their detriment. This was, in short, a very different type of 'complicity' in a very different area of the extended 'societal state'.

The malign exercise of power: Unofficial collaboration with the Stasi

The highly formalised system and the sheer extent of the regularised network of unofficial informers for the East German State Security Service was unique in twentieth-century dictatorships, whether of the capitalist or communist variety. By way of comparison, the Gestapo employed 7,000 officials for a total population of 66,000,000 in Nazi Germany; the Stasi employed over 91,000 full-time staff in a GDR population of about 16,400,000 in 1989.[11] Unlike the Gestapo, which relied heavily on the sporadic willingness of many Germans to inform voluntarily on neighbours with whom they might have a personal score to settle, the Stasi developed a highly organised system of enrolling and directing the regular activities of large numbers of citizens, seeking not merely to gain an insight into, but even to intervene actively and alter the character of any imagined, potential or actual oppositional activities in the GDR. To this end, an extraordinary system of official guidelines and procedures was developed, with a formal categorisation of different types of unofficial collaborator, and detailed instructions for the relevant procedures for training, meeting, reporting, analysis and controlling of informants.[12] Such a system could only work if very significant numbers of people were, indeed, willing to act as informants in this highly organised way.

The number of informal collaborators, or IMs (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*), exploded over the years. In the mid-1950s, there were between 20,000 to 30,000 informants. Thereafter the figure rose steadily, reaching around 100,000 in the crisis year of 1968; and with the more porous borders of the GDR following *Ostpolitik*, the size of the Stasi mushroomed. The highest point was attained with a total of around 180,000 unofficial informants in 1975 – ironically, perhaps the year in which the GDR also scored highest in terms of the rather nebulous question of popular support (or perhaps better: widespread hopes for improvement and willingness to contribute to such potential improvement). Thereafter, the figures remained fairly steady, fluctuating between 170,000 to 180,000 – an average ratio of one informer to every 60 or

so adults, although distributed more thinly in some areas, in greater concentration in others – with an annual turnover of about one in ten informants dropping out or being dropped and replacements being recruited.[13] Most relationships appear to have been broken off because the Stasi found the informant was not, or was no longer, being useful; only around one in five informers initiated the termination of their services themselves. Cumulatively, assuming an average turnover of around 17,500 informers each year, this means that in the Honecker era perhaps somewhere in the region of 500,000 East Germans at one time or another informed on their fellow citizens. Only in the later 1980s did the Ministry for State Security register greater problems with the recruitment and retention of unofficial informants – precisely at the time when popular dissatisfaction was also visibly growing. From 1986 onwards, those leaving the informal service of the Stasi outnumbered those agreeing to take up a commitment to be an unofficial informant, posing a considerable problem not only for the surveillance of the population at a time of increasing unrest, but also with respect to the intended 'secrecy' of the methods and means employed by the Stasi, knowledge of which thus inevitably seeped out among the wider population.[14]

It seems nevertheless to have been relatively easy to recruit willing informants, on the basis of a considerable variety of motives. At one end of the spectrum, many informants were committed and loyal citizens of the GDR who were genuinely convinced that it was important to keep a watchful eye out for what they held to be the subversive activities of dangerous 'enemies of the state'. For them, 'security' meant precisely that. A fairly high percentage of informants were members of the SED; in 1962, for example, in the administrative district of Neubrandenburg, as many as 40–50 per cent of IMs were members of the SED.[15] Some informants were employed in positions in which it would appear routine or simply 'part of the job' to inform, such as members of the police and armed services, or those occupying elevated positions within factories and business enterprises. The problem, however, of relying only on loyal and publicly committed citizens was that they often did not have obvious or inconspicuous means of access to the sorts of circles that were deemed worthy of surveillance. Thus far wider groups had to be brought into the network of informants.

In probably the majority of cases, the informant was persuaded into cooperation through a combination of feeling important, being attracted by small advantages, social rewards, material inducements or by a sense of adventure and stimulation to break an otherwise routine existence.[16] Attempts were made to recruit promising youngsters while still at school: teenagers might find themselves being called into the head-teacher's office and being left alone

to talk with a visitor, and might be flattered by the attention devoted to them; they might also feel a sense of some relief at having high-level support and a clear career path mapped out for the future. While surveillance and reporting were important in every area of East German life, including among young people still at school and apprentices and workers on the factory floor, some areas were clearly politically more important, or potentially problematic, than others. Particular attention therefore had to be paid to placing or recruiting appropriate people in areas such as the 'alternative culture' of the Prenzlauer Berg 'scene' – where as an IM the supposedly dissident poet Sascha Anderson wrought havoc with the lives and relationships of his supposed 'friends' – and among the peace activists and human-rights campaigners in the church circles of the 1980s. In some of these cases, the IM might even feel (or later claim that they had felt) that informing was a legitimate method of communication, and that they could thereby contribute to making the regime understand better the concerns of people on the ground, or even 'protect' the interests of dissidents. Some informants in the dissident scene, such as Knud Wollenberger, informing under the code name IM 'Donald' on his wife Vera Wollenberger and her friends who were active in the unofficial peace movements of the Protestant Church in the 1980s, later claimed this as an attempted justification of activities that put people in serious danger.[17] A not dissimilar defence was used by Manfred Stolpe, a prominent churchman in the GDR and later Prime Minister of the Land Brandenburg in post-unification Germany, with respect to his frequent regular contacts with Stasi officers.[18] In probably the vast majority of mundane cases in less fraught areas – and only the tip of the iceberg has been touched by the now notorious cases that received so much media attention in the 1990s – motives were probably far more banal.

Something in the order of less than one in ten collaborators was in some obvious way 'coerced' into informing; on the Stasi's own figures, only 7.7 per cent of informants were recruited through a process of clear coercion, although this figure hardly takes into account the more diffuse feelings of fear, guilt, dislike of the situation but failure to see any realistic alternative, which probably account for a very much larger number of cases in which 'coercion' might arguably be too strong a word, but in which the informant would undoubtedly have preferred not to have been caught in a threatening situation in which this seemed the only viable option to 'choose'. Perhaps bullying would be an appropriate term to account for many such cases. Informing could, for example, be a means of ensuring better conditions or a shorter prison sentence, as in the case of informers within the prison cells of the horrendous Stasi prison at Hohenschönhausen, often at the expense of other prisoners.

Concern for the well-being of an imprisoned partner could also be used by the Stasi as a ploy to gain or retain a person in a key position as an informer, as was attempted in the case of the writer Brigitte Reimann.

Much of the evidence about professed motives comes from confessions and interviews carried out after 1990, with all the attendant methodological problems. But Reimann's private diary entries at the time she was actually contacted by the Stasi are highly revealing of the complexity of motives and the mixed feelings – a combination of a sense of idealism, of being flattered and intrigued, as well as a little dubious and ultimately angry and fearful – which could be aroused by such contacts. In September 1957, on the first approach by the Stasi in the form of one Herr Kettner, Reimann was only too well aware of the fact that she was being psychologically manipulated; yet she allowed herself to be 'almost convinced' by the 'idealistic goals' of the Stasi. At the same time, she was 'attracted by the adventure' and 'had to keep laughing about this game of playing Indians – code names, secret apartments, and so on'; and she was also genuinely attracted by the prospect of being able to contribute to the task of 'liberating the good, clean kernel of socialism from all the muck clinging to it'.[19] At this time, she agreed to inform under the code name of 'Caterine', on the condition that she would give just general reports of prevalent views and current opinions without mentioning any names, and signed the agreement accordingly, joking to herself that she had already broken the duty of strict secrecy by confiding in her diary. But in December 1957 Reimann's then partner Günter was arrested and her relationship with the Stasi became far less of a laughing matter. By 25 January 1958, Reimann's diary entry is far from light-hearted:

> I've got to make a break with the Stasi, there's nothing for it. They have tried to blackmail me ... They promise me that Günter will get probation and that I will be allowed to visit him more often than is really allowed ... and that they will smuggle in letters from me ... Good God! What swines they are! They are speculating on my emotions ... In recompense I am to deliver reports on our writers ... This dreadful decision: either to help my most beloved and for this to perform spying services – or to jump off and leave Günter to his fate ... I don't even know for certain what Günter would think about the whole thing.[20]

It was relatively easy for individuals approached by the Stasi with a view to informing to avoid being ensnared, although inevitably anyone in this situation would worry about potentially adverse consequences in both employment and private life. A common method of avoiding entering an agreement to inform was simply to break the demanded code of secrecy by telling someone else of the approach – a family member, a colleague or a friend – on hearing which the Stasi would immediately drop the potential informant. Another was simply to refuse. It was also possible just to deliver 'information' of mind-numbing uselessness, and thus be dropped.

For many, the impact of Stasi surveillance and interference with their lives was devastating.[21] In the case of members of the dissident political scene, a classic Stasi ploy was to initiate the breakup of previously harmonious relationships by sowing the seeds of mutual suspicion and distrust; the reputations of morally upright dissidents (such as pastors) might be destroyed by casting suspicions over their fidelity; the children and relatives of dissidents might be subjected to harassment and personal disadvantage. Attempts to come together to discuss lyric poetry or other writing critical of the state, to listen or play whatever was designated as politically subversive music, to engage in organised protests, could land an individual in prison for indefinite periods of time without any apparent possibility of resorting to legal rules or appeals to human rights. People could emerge with their health, self-confidence and future working lives damaged beyond recovery.

At the extreme, there are suspicions that the Stasi not only initiated well-attested murders and attempted murders of a number of individuals but also attempted more subtle methods of causing long-term ill-health and death from less easily identifiable causes, such as cancers caused by exposure to sustained high levels of radiation.[22] The subsequent serious illnesses and premature deaths of dissidents such as the novelist Jürgen Fuchs, and the author of the critical analysis of *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*, Rudolf Bahro, have been linked by some to the suspicion of exposure to extraordinarily high and sustained levels of X-rays while waiting for interrogations, and being strapped to unpleasant chairs in small prison cells in front of mysterious closed boxes – boxes that, along with their mysterious apparatus, curiously disappeared after the collapse of the SED system.[23] There have also been suspicions that symptoms of mental illness were actually created by 'medical' treatment, as in the case of Pastor Heinz Eggert. Eggert, who fell ill while on a family holiday at the Baltic in the summer of 1983, sought medical help for a depressive psychiatric illness and was treated in a closed psychiatric institution by a doctor who was also a Stasi informer. His later fears that medications administered actually produced and exacerbated the symptoms of illness have on further investigation proved to be without adequate foundation; the Stasi's crimes in this case consisted rather of persistent harassment of family and friends while Eggert was ill, and breaching of medical confidentiality to report on his illness and thus to discredit him.[24]

It is difficult to assess the impact of reporting on those who were subject to routine surveillance, or who simply knew they might be reported on if they

stepped too far out of line. Where no apparent damage was done by anodyne situation reports, and where the vast majority of the populace were aware of the existence of the Stasi, it appears to have been simply taken for granted as a fact of life, in light of which certain precautions had to be taken (which for some individuals undoubtedly meant major restrictions on their activities, whereas for others the impact barely registered). Undoubtedly the codes of secrecy and manipulation had an effect on the character of inter-personal relationships, but trust and friendship still were possible for most people most of the time. The personal consequences of Stasi informing in these cases often proved infinitely more explosive in the 1990s, once the files were opened and the identities of former informers were revealed.

Claudia Rusch, for example, whose mother was close friends with the well-known dissidents Katja and Robert Havemann, grew up with Stasi surveillance as a fact of life. Claudia was just five years old when Wolf Biermann was expelled, and Robert Havemann placed under house arrest; she now rapidly became used to the presence of the Stasi:

> Suddenly the Stasi were everywhere, men in uniform or everyday clothes. They sat in Lada cars parked in front of the house, they observed us, they followed us, but they were not allowed to talk to us. Sometimes they hid like hares behind the trees.
>
> I did not understand why Robert was constantly to be seen on television and was now no longer allowed out of the house, why police barricaded the street and would no longer allow my mother to see Katja.
>
> But I quickly got used to it. I am still aware that at that time I did not really find the presence of the Stasi threatening. For me, the eternally waiting men were reassuring. They kept an eye on me [in the benign sense of 'looked after me']. Just as in the sense of the Stasi-ballad: bodyguards.[25]

Perhaps these were merely the innocent perceptions of child who was herself in no real danger. And, despite her close connections with the dissident scene, Claudia Rusch had happy memories of her own 'free German youth' in the 1970s and '80s. With the opening of the Stasi archives after unification, however, the unsolved mystery of her grandfather's premature death in 1967 at the age of 42, in a damp interrogation cell of the Stasi prison in Rostock, precipitated far greater emotional agony. Searching desperately around the variety of clues to possible identity – symbolic cover names relating to trees, personal information and particular incidents, the length of time the informant had known him – Claudia and her mother came aghast to the unwilling suspicion that the informant could only have been Claudia's grandmother, following the collapse of their marriage in 1962. Claudia and her mother contemplated with agony the possibility that such a close family member could have betrayed another. They could not actually believe it of her; and yet:

> that was the real strength of the State Security: to produce the effect that millions of people behaved towards one another with anxiety, self-control and suspicion. They ensured that if you told a political joke you automatically lowered your voice. Anticipatory obedience spread through every sinew of society and intimidated a whole nation.
>
> But not my Grandma. She would never have betrayed us. We were her family. Or at least, everything that was left of it after the war.
>
> But perhaps after all? Had she first informed on her husband, and then on her daughter . . .? How badly can one misjudge a person? How far can emotional betrayal go? What can one still believe, if that was true?[26]

Ultimately – and purely because of her mother's chance remark to a very close friend and confidante, a psychologist to whom she had turned for advice in this emotional turmoil – it turned out that the informant was not, after all, the grandmother. Ironically, it was the close friend, the psychologist, who confessed purely because the mother had, falsely, claimed that she would in any event find out the identity of the informer within a couple of weeks from the files. This confession from the former confidante brought to a total and utter end a friendship that had lasted thirty years or more.

It was not merely friendships that might be broken by post-unification revelations from the files. Curiously, the fear also existed that one's own biography might be presented in such a totally alien light that one's very identity was challenged. As the dissident Lutz Rathenow put it, the unwillingness on the part of a former acquaintance, Frank-Wolf Matthies, to look at his Stasi files was based in 'the fear that one's whole life would in retrospect appear to have been steered from outside'.[27] This challenged the very conception of the self-made life so central to post-Enlightenment thinking about the individual.

Informal collaboration with such a malign organisation was thus a very different matter from voluntary help with a women's group, a stamp-collecting society or a children's camp in the summer.

The diffusion of power in East German society

Participation in the multiplicity of little honeycomb cells of the many overlapping and intersecting elements in the GDR networks of power and social organisation was thus very widespread; but, as we have seen, the power elite proper was very small, with real power concentrated in very few hands. At the lower levels of society, participation in the structures of power – often on a

voluntary and temporary, if time-consuming, basis – did not displace primary occupation as determinant of social status; at the higher levels, it was the principal determinant of status. And as far as secret collaboration with the Stasi was concerned, the extended exercise of power was very different in character and implication from that in more visible areas of the societal state. Power was by no means a matter purely of formal position in the system; nor did it overlap neatly with social stratification, except at the very top.

There was a variety of privileges for those who were prepared to make a 'positive' contribution to the running of the state. At the lowest level, the little networks of favours, of preferential treatment in relation to scarce goods and services, and of generally being 'in good standing', could make a quite considerable difference to the patterns of daily life and the chances of achieving a holiday, a change in working hours or conditions, or an improvement in housing conditions or leisure facilities. For shorter or longer periods of time, unofficial collaboration with the Stasi could bring all manner of large and small privileges and rewards, financial, material and psychological. Positive participation in the business of the state, whether malign or benign, in a paid or an honorary capacity, could also be a long-term investment against the miseries of poverty in old age. There were significant additional financial contributions, over and above the regular state pensions, for those who worked in the state administration, the parties and mass organisations, served as Chair of Collective Farms (LPGs), or – to take an example much higher up the hierarchy of the paid functionary system – as General Directors of major industrial concerns.[28] There were also politically justified 'pensions of honour' (*Ehrenpensionen*) for 'fighters against fascism' and 'those persecuted by the Nazi regime' ('Kämpfer gegen den Faschismus and Verfolgten des Naziregimes'), as well as for people who had served for twenty-five years or more as members of the 'citizens' militia groups of the working class' ('Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse'). These higher pensions were the outcome of political decisions for preferential treatment of specific groups, irrespective of the individual's actual social class position with respect to type of work (manual or non-manual, professional and so on). Pensioners were otherwise the absolutely poorest group in the GDR; seen as non-productive drains on state resources, they alone had the privilege of freedom to travel to the West – if they could find anyone willing to pay for them.

Thus significant numbers of East Germans were in one way or another implicated in the extensive and very varied system of the extended exercise of power, a system that massively expanded the loose metaphorical boundaries of the state well beyond the narrow group of the ruling 'power elite' proper. This is in part why sharply drawn distinctions between 'state' and 'society', 'regime' and 'people' are so difficult to apply, and actually so misleading with respect to the GDR. While there was indeed a massive concentration of power at the top, the people's paradox is in part explained by the fact that those 'below' did participate in the running of their state in many respects. Moreover, while functionaries at the grass roots had very little real power or influence 'upwards', they did often seek genuinely to represent local people's concerns. Thus the 'state' was experienced at the base as at least partly benign, if often also risible. People's representatives were to some extent a part of local communities, and power spread like a dye through the wider fabric of society, colouring great patches of all areas of professional occupation and social activity, in some areas visible and benign, in others dark and disturbing.