‘In our District, the State Is Secure’: The East German Secret Police Response to the Events of 1989 in Perleberg District

GARY BRUCE

The centre of Perleberg, today an elegant city of 14,100 inhabitants in the northeastern German province of Brandenburg, sits on an island in the small Perleberg river. Squatting in the middle of the old square is the massive red brick St Jacob’s church, looking as if it has elbowed its way into position among the tall, irregular merchant houses. Facing the church is the equally delightful fourteenth century city hall. A few kilometres to the north of the main square, and off the island, is a nondescript grey building tucked in a pleasant grove on the corner of Hagenstrasse and Lübzowerstrasse. A small plaque on the outside of the building indicates that it is a branch of the district hospital and indeed, on entering, a friendly receptionist sits to the left and straight ahead, through glass doors, patients sit quietly, reading, playing with their children. This building’s functions are distinctly different from those of fifteen years previously. In 1989, the year of dramatic revolution in East Germany, orders went out from this building to subdue, control and monitor the population of the Kreis (district) of Perleberg. The occupants – the staff of the East German secret police, the Stasi, for Perleberg District – watched in astonishment as the crowds outside St Jacob’s church grew larger and as their demands grew bolder.

In many ways Perleberg District was a remarkably ordinary one of the 216 Stasi districts in East Germany, possessing no sensitive military installations or sites of potential opposition such as universities. It was not a border district. With 56,288 eligible voters, Perleberg District was slightly smaller than average.1 It was located

I gratefully acknowledge the tremendous support of the Schwerin branch of the Stasi Archives, from Herr Niemann, lead archivist on this project, Frau Schröder, head of the branch, Frau Lemcke and Herr Hoffmann. Out there, in a former NVA barracks in a farmer’s field some 20 km away from Schwerin, they undertake some of the most important research and archival support on GDR history. I also wish to thank the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for its continuing financial generosity, and the anonymous reviewers of this article for their extremely insightful comments.

in the sleepy Bezirk (Region) of Schwerin, a predominantly agricultural northern region that in 1989 experienced the second-fewest number of demonstrations in East Germany. Perleberg District was, however, home to a significant level of industry, particularly two large factories located in its largest city, Wittenberge: the tissue factory VEB Zellstoff- und Zellwollewerke Wittenberge, and the sewing machine plant VEB Nähmaschinenwerke Wittenberge, whose products were household names in East Germany. \(^2\) Smaller factories such as VEB Märkische Ölwerke and VEB Dauermilchwerk Perleberg were also sources of employment. Just up from the first Stasi headquarters in Perleberg was the district hospital.

The district office of the Stasi in Perleberg had a complement of fifty-four full-time employees (Hauptamtliche Mitarbeiter) and a fluctuating number of secret informants. At the start of 1989, the district employed 245 secret informants (Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter – IM), not including those who allowed the Stasi to use their residence as a conspiratorial meeting place (Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter zur Sicherung der Konspiration – IMKs), or the lowest level of informant who generally just reported in broad terms on the mood of factory colleagues, rather than working on a specific case (Gesellschaftlicher Mitarbeiter für Sicherheit – GMS). If the latter two categories are included, the number of informants swells to 377. \(^3\) One of the most astonishing revelations since 1989 is that the Stasi was considerably larger than the Gestapo, with an informant net roughly six times as dense. \(^4\) Although overall the Stasi may have been the largest secret police per capita in world history, \(^5\) there were regional variations. On average there existed one full-time Stasi worker for every 180 individuals in East Germany, and one secret informant for every ninety individuals. Perleberg District was far below the national average, employing one full-time Stasi worker for every 1,000 individuals, and one secret informant for every 150 individuals, placing its per capita presence below even that of the StB, the Czech secret police, generally regarded as one of the more benign East European secret police forces. The Stasi in Perleberg District employed (both officially and unofficially) fewer than 1 per cent of the voter-eligible population, lower even than the national average of 2 per cent.

Why, then, should there be an investigation of the Stasi at a district level? Although it may be tempting to investigate Stasi conduct solely at the Berlin headquarters level, a complete picture of the Stasi requires analysis of the district level, for it was here that the bulk of the internal surveillance took place. Stasi district offices ran 51 per cent

---

\(^2\) ‘Information über sicherheitspolitisch bedeutsame Aspekte im Zusammenhang mit der Durchsetzung von Ordnung und Sicherheit im VEB Zellstoff- und Zellwollewerk Wittenberge (ZZWW)’, 25 September 1989. BStU-Schwerin, BV Schwerin, AKG 04c, 92. VEB Zellstoff- und Zellwollewerk Wittenberge employed 2,347 people, including 113 Cubans, 52 Mozambiquans and 75 Poles.


\(^5\) Jens Giesche has described it in these terms. See Rolf Steininger, 17. Juni 1953: Der Anfang vom langen Ende der DDR (Munich: Olzog, 2003), 93.
of all informants, although these offices employed only 13 per cent of the full-time workers. In October 1988 during a long talk to Stasi officers, Erich Mielke, the Minister of State Security from 1957 until 1989, spoke of the importance of the district (Kreis) in securing the regime. He described the ‘basic duty’ of the District as the ‘protection of... society and the continuous and reliable protection of... the state’. Furthermore, on the revolution broadly, Leipzig and Berlin have received the lion’s share of attention, but few studies of the Stasi or the revolution at a district level have appeared. It is worth recalling that between August 1989 and April 1990 demonstrations took place in 522 locations in East Germany. Finally, the source base for Perleberg District is particularly advantageous, running for some 137 metres in contrast to other districts where the holdings are a mere seven metres. The Stasi destruction of documents between the fall of the Wall and the citizen occupation of their offices was much more extensive than historians commonly assume.

The virtually unlimited access to documents from the former East Germany has not quenched many of the key debates around that country and its demise. Indeed, it has tended to inflame them. This article examines the documents from the East German Ministry for State Security, or in common parlance the Stasi, from the district office (Kreisdienststelle) of Perleberg for 1989. One of its goals is the introduction of empirical evidence on 1989 in an outlying district. The material in the documentation also lends itself to an analysis of three key areas of debate about East Germany: first, what was the balance of popular pressure, changing external factors and regime implosion as the factors in the collapse of the East German regime? Second, what was the nature

7 Ibid. All translations are by the author.
8 Of the thousands of works on the demise of East Germany, very few deal with small towns. This is noticeable in Ehrhart Neubert’s recent mammoth Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR 1949–1989 (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2000), which does a better job than most in trying to integrate outlying areas into the story but still focuses primarily on major centres. Uwe Schwabe has attempted to bring attention to the revolution in the outlying areas through an analysis of statistics in ‘Der Herbst’89 in Zahlen – Demonstrationen und Kundgebungen vom August 1989 bis zum April 1990’, in Kuhrt et al. Die SED-Herrschaft, 719–35. Jonathan Osmond argues for the need to see the revolution more broadly than simply in Berlin: Jonathan Osmond, ‘Yet Another Failed German Revolution?’, in Moira Donald and Tim Rees, eds., Reinterpreting Revolution in Twentieth-Century Europe (New York: St. Martin’s, 2001), 140–58. One study on the Stasi at a district level appeared in 1996, but it served rather as a cursory introduction to appended documents. See Süss, ‘Die Durchdringung der Gesellschaft’, 115–37. Jena presents an interesting case study because of its university and its important optics works Zeiss Jena, but these features make it somewhat atypical of East Germany. The university had been a hotbed of opposition in the 1950s (see Patrik von zur Mühlen, Der ‘Eisenberger Kreis’: Jugendwiderstand und Verfolgung in der DDR 1953–1958 (Bonn: Dietz, 1993), and the Junge Gemeinde was a major opposition group in the 1970s (see Neubert, Geschichte, 293–5). A study of the Stasi in the region (Bezirk) of Schwerin has appeared recently, but it is unreliable: Edward Peterson, The Secret Police and the Revolution (Westport: Praeger, 2002). A useful case study of Schwerin during 1989 is found in Jonathan Grix, The Role of the Masses in the Collapse of the GDR (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000). Schwerin does pose difficulties for a case study, given the fact that all of Schwerin Region’s Department XX files (internal opposition) were destroyed during the revolution.
9 Schwabe, ‘Der Herbst’89’, 720.
of control in East Germany? And finally, what does the Stasi’s role (or lack thereof) in the revolution tell historians about the organisation?10

The May 1989 communal elections and material concerns

East German elections were always extravagant affairs. Bands played while local dignitaries shook hands with voters heading toward the booths to exercise the ‘first duty of a socialist citizen’ and greeted first-time voters with a bouquet of flowers. The communal elections of 7 May 1989 were conducted with equal fanfare, but their approach meant that the Stasi in Perleberg District spent most of spring 1989 working to secure the electoral success of its political superiors, the Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands – SED).11 ‘Symbol 89’ was the codename given to the Stasi operation to secure the communal elections throughout East Germany, an operation that involved careful monitoring of individuals who might disrupt the election – such as church officials, or those who had applied to emigrate from East Germany – and the use of informants to monitor societal discontent that could lead to non-participation at the election.12 Stasi informants identified 370 individuals who planned to protest against the election by not voting, and pointed to a lack of apartment space, poor roads and supply problems as key factors behind potential non-participation at the election.13 As the Stasi already had information on 582 individuals such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, former criminals and church leaders who were likely not to participate (and in some cases had not for years), secret informants had uncovered in advance 370 of the 1068 individuals (or 35 per cent) who ended up not casting a ballot, an impressive performance given the modest complement of informants.14

To an outsider the results of the elections were an astonishing success for the ruling SED, reporting an endorsement of the election unity lists by 98.88 per cent. Behind the scenes, however, the Stasi was well aware that even in the strictly controlled GDR, the population had voiced dissent at the election. The official number of non-voters

10 These are three of the key questions for researchers since 1989. All three are central to the important works Stefan Wolle, Die heile Welt der Diktatur (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1999), and Armin Mitter and Stefan Wölle, Untergang auf Raten (Munich: Bertelsmann Verlag, 1993). The first question has preoccupied researchers of the East German revolution, while the second is framed within the continuing heated debate on totalitarianism in East Germany. An excellent summary of these debates is found in Corey Ross, The East German Dictatorship (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Works on the Stasi, including Peterson, Secret Police, and Jens Gieseke, Miekle Konzern: Die Geschichte der Stasi 1945–1990 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001), arrive at different conclusions on the reliability of the Stasi during the revolution, as discussed below. For a further summary of key issues of debate on East German history see Catherine Epstein, ‘East Germany and Its History since 1989’, Journal of Modern History, 75 (2003), 634–61.

11 These elections dealt with local governing bodies such as district councils and mayorships. These were not elections to the national parliament. See Karl Wilhelm Fricke, ‘Die DDR-Kommunalwahlen ’88 als Zäsur für das Umschlagen von Opposition in Revolution’, in Kuhrt, Die SED-Herrschaft, 467.

12 ‘Symbol 89’ Lagefilm. BStU-Schwerin, BV Schwerin, KD Perleberg 10556 (unpaginated).


14 Ibid.
at the election was a staggering 165 per cent higher than at the last election in 1986. Specialised workers (Facharbeiter) and factory workers comprised the lion’s share of non-voters. Unlike elsewhere in East Germany where individuals wrote letters of complaint about the falsified results, ministers voiced disapproval in sermons, and demonstrators took to the streets – as was the case of the 1,000-strong protest in Leipzig – no such protests took place in Perleberg District.

As is evident from the paragraphs above, many residents of Perleberg District who refused to cast their ballot on 7 May 1989 did so because of immediate standard-of-living issues. East Germans in County Reckenzin complained of not having mains water supply. The building-site manager for the factory VEB Meliorationsbau threatened not to take part in the election because he had been waiting twelve years for a telephone. Some residents protested vociferously that the only restaurant in their area had been closed for years for repairs, others that they could not obtain fresh fruit after 4 p.m. In the lead-up to the election, citizens were called on to put in writing to city councils issues that they would like addressed. In Schwerin Region 1,715 did so, of whom 246 were from Perleberg District. The key issues in these letters, according to the Stasi, were lack of proper living accommodation, the environment, lack of telephones, poor roads and a lack of building supplies.

On the situation in the city of Wittenberge, the industrial centre of Perleberg District, the Stasi prepared a special report that suggests that for some in the district, immediate living standard issues in and of themselves were not the sole factor behind discontent. The Stasi admitted that the situation in Perleberg District was considerably worse than neighbouring industrial centres such as Güstrow, and worse than across the region in general. Wittenberge could no longer meet the bread needs of the population, causing the local authorities to import 12,000 rolls (Brötchen), a staple in any German diet, weekly from five districts as far away as Magdeburg, which, according to the Stasi, affected their freshness and appearance. The Stasi did not foresee much improvement in this area until a large bakery, scheduled for 1994, had been built in Perleberg. Important factories such as the VEB Zellstoff- und Zellwollewerk, VEB Nähmaschinenwerk Wittenberge and the Märkische Ölwerke were often shut down due to a lack of spare parts. The Stasi grimly reported: ‘It

---

15 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 76.
must be admitted that without support from the Region, it will not be possible to solve the problems of the city of Wittenberge.\textsuperscript{22} Given the precarious situation in Wittenberge, the Stasi recommended a swift response to the dire supply problems. What is noteworthy, however, is that this lack of material goods was often coupled with a distrust of the regime. Stasi appraisal of the popular mood points to the discrepancy between propaganda and reality. The propaganda and lies of the SED about increases in production and impressive over-fulfilling of plans exacerbated the situation.\textsuperscript{23} Walter Süß, in his investigation of Jena District, has argued a similar conclusion, suggesting that deep popular concern resulted from the contradiction between regime propaganda and actual living conditions.\textsuperscript{24} It appears, then, that material concerns in and of themselves were not the cause of opposition for many in the district, but that these were combined with an exasperation due to the SED’s glossing over of the situation.

**Exodus**

Western historians often mistakenly assume that it was impossible for East Germans to emigrate legally to Western countries. While it was a lengthy and complicated process, and one which overwhelmingly led to a denial of the request, East Germans could apply to emigrate to the West. Between 1977 and 1988, 121,000 East Germans emigrated legally.\textsuperscript{25} Given the difficulty of the procedure, thousands of East Germans attempted high-risk measures of escape – the Stasi prevented fifty-four attempts to hijack airplanes out of East Germany between 1962 and 1973 – or opted for the easier route of remaining in the West while on an officially sanctioned visit. While the roughly 900 who died at the border while trying to escape are fairly well known, the 1,000 who were injured and the staggering 72,000 who were jailed for their failed attempt remain in the shadows of historical scholarship. The Stasi was the primary instrument for investigating individuals who had applied to leave legally (\textit{Antragsteller auf ständige Ausreise} – AstA) as well as illegal exodus known as ‘escape’ (\textit{Flucht}). AstAs became more common following the Helsinki conference in 1973.\textsuperscript{26} Applications to emigrate to the West were by no means a new phenomenon in 1989, although there was marked increase then. In 1980, for every hundred East Germans, two applied to emigrate. By June 1989 that number had risen to twelve in a hundred.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 77.


\textsuperscript{26} Bernd Eisenfeld, ‘Flucht und Ausreise, Macht und Ohnmacht’, in Kuhrt, \textit{Die SED-Herrschaft}, 383–96. Mary Fulbrook correctly points out that an important aspect of the Helsinki Final Act was that the East German government had \textit{publicly} committed itself to human rights. See Mary Fulbrook, ‘Popular Discontent and Political Activism in the GDR’, \textit{Contemporary European History}, 2, 3 (1993), 277.

\textsuperscript{27} Eisenfeld, ‘Die Ausreisebewegung’, 203.
The number of escapees, however, was rising. Settling down to breakfast in his Linz hotel on 26 July 1989, where he planned to conduct business with an Austrian firm, the director of the tissue factory in Wittenberge, the major industrial centre in Perleberg District, realised that his director of technology was late. As a member of the SED, a graduate of the Karl Marx University of Leipzig, a reliable factory colleague since 1978 and the father of four sons, the director of technology seemed an unlikely candidate to flee to the West on a routine business trip, but this is precisely what had happened. For days afterwards, bewildered co-workers gossiped about the defection. This case represents a high-profile defection from the district and one that the Stasi investigated inconclusively, but the exodus, both legal and illegal, of East Germans from all walks of life was becoming a growing Stasi concern in summer and autumn 1989.

When Hungary began rolling up the barbed wire that formed the Iron Curtain between Hungary and Austria in May 1989, East Germans vacationing in Hungary on the summer break from school used the opportunity to flee to the West. By late summer roughly 1,600 East Germans had fled East Germany in this manner. On 19 August alone, 661 East Germans fled to the West through Hungary. Although a few days later an East German, Kurt Werner Schulz, would be shot in a scuffle with a Hungarian border guard, in general the whole scene was taking place remarkably peacefully.

The permeable Iron Curtain between Hungary and Austria was having consequences hundreds of kilometres to the north. The leader of the Stasi in Schwerin Region sent out an urgent memorandum to all District Stasi leaders. He reminded his subordinates that all those who were applying to leave East Germany – even for a holiday – must be reported to the SED secretary for the area, and he advised them to be ever-vigilant for increased attempts to leave East Germany directly. Furthermore, all those who were applying to emigrate from East Germany were to be controlled through informants in order to prevent any hostile behaviour toward East Germany. Informants were also to be employed against those who were planning to travel to Hungary.

Concern for ‘legal’ emigration caused Werner Ryll, the leader of the Stasi for Perleberg District, using a Stasi tactic in place since the 1970s, to command those

29 Although Hungary cut away, to great fanfare, the barbed wire on its border with Austria, other border defences remained intact. Over 4,000 people were arrested at this border between May and the full opening of the border in August. Karsten Timmer, Vom Aufbruch zum Umblick: Die Bürgerbewegung in der DDR 1989 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 99.
in positions of authority, such as factory bosses, to apply pressure on employees to withdraw their emigration applications. The tactic met with limited success as some simply left illegally. By 16 August the district of Perleberg had lost twenty-six citizens to illegal emigration and a cluster of five others were holed up in the West German embassy in Budapest awaiting permission to leave. Within a few months the numbers of those illegally leaving the district rose. By the end of September, 110 individuals had left, three-quarters of whom had done so via Hungary. These individuals ran the gamut of occupations, from waiters to doctors and nurses, and employees of German Rail, the sewing machine factory and various construction sites. The Stasi called daily meetings with the regular police to inquire as to who had applied for a travel permit to Hungary, as ordered by Erich Mielke, head of the Stasi.

Here historians are provided with a glimpse into the nature of control in East Germany. Although the Stasi was not the sole instrument of control, relying on its partner institutions such as the party organisation in factories to provide the state pressure to conform, it was clearly the most important by virtue of its co-ordinating function. It was the Stasi that arranged meetings and co-ordinated activities with other branches. The nature of this control is not shockingly brutal, nor do the individuals involved appear bloodthirsty, yet there is something deeply unsettling about the silent invasion of the lives of East Germans. When reading this material, I was struck by the relatively tame approach to control; this does not conjure up images of an Arthur Koestler, Ayn Rand or Vassily Aksyonov novel, yet the goal is clear: to rob individuals of freedom to manoeuvre, of their rights agreed to by East Germany at the Helsinki Conference, and to do so through coercive use of a variety of state instruments.

In Perleberg District 1988 had seen a total of eighty-nine AstA applications involving 193 people. By 20 June 1989 the district council had already received seventy-five AstA applications involving 171 people. Forty-four of these applications had already been approved and the individuals had left. Although we do not have the breakdown of these numbers for Perleberg District, we do have them for the Schwerin Region in which Perleberg was situated. A variety of social backgrounds was represented in the applicants from Schwerin Region: 15 per cent were in industry, 7.4 per cent in agriculture, 5.8 per cent in the construction industry, 13.2 per cent in

34 A continuation of former policy does not always translate into ‘paralysis’, a label some have applied to the East German government in face of the exodus. See Damon Terrill, ‘Tolerance Lost: Disaffection, Dissent and Revolution in the German Democratic Republic’, East European Quarterly, 28, 3 (1994), 366. Similarly, Jonathan Grix argues that the GDR leadership ‘did not respond’ to this crisis. Jonathan Grix, The Role of the Masses in the Collapse of the GDR (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 97.
36 Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, eds., Ich liebe euch doch alle! (Berlin: Basisdruck, 1990), 151.
37 Information über die Lage auf dem Gebiet der Antragstellung auf ständige Ausreise nach nichtsozialistischen Staaten und Westberlin sowie bei Privat-und Touristenreisen und damit im Zusammenhang stehende feindlich-negative Handlungen im Kreis Perleberg’, 2 June 1989 (This date is likely to be an error since ‘20 June’ is referred to in the document). BStU-Schwerin, BV Schwerin AKG 06b, 58.
trade and 12.3 per cent from the health field. Inhabitants of Wittenberge applied to emigrate in droves – forming 65 per cent of the total number of AstA applications for Perleberg District. What is most striking about those who applied to leave permanently for the West is that they were young, with relatively few material concerns. Over 60 per cent were between the ages of twenty-five and forty. The Stasi itself seemed to be at a loss to explain the exodus among this segment of the population: ‘The following characteristics are typical of those applying to leave East Germany. All had a comfortable standard of living. They were average to very good workers at their workplaces. They participated actively in social functions of the workers’ collective and in their neighbourhoods. None of them had given any cause for concern’.

As had been the case for most of the 1980s, the number of Perleberg residents who were applying to emigrate was a focus of Stasi work in the district, as revealed by the number of operations targeting individuals who had filed applications. An OV (Operativer Vorgang – operational file) was the highest category of Stasi operation, usually involving a number of secret informants and a complex array of other monitoring such as mail and telephone. In October 1989 the Perleberg District Stasi had five OVs under way (Codenamed Tendenz, Täuscher, Taxi, Brille and Stoma). OV Tendenz and OV Brille were long-running investigations of two prominent Lutheran ministers, while the others dealt with individuals who had applied to leave for the West. At the same time the Stasi was actively at work on the next category of operation, known as an OPK (Operative Personenkontrolle – operational individual control), monitoring operations against certain suspect individuals. If more information came to light, OPKs could be converted into the more elaborate OVs. In May, there were forty OPKs under way, of which nineteen dealt with applicants to emigrate. By October, the Stasi was involved with fifty-one OPKs, eighteen of which had been initiated during the year – only three more than in 1988 and fewer than the twenty-three which the Stasi initiated in 1987 (Bearing in mind that the year 1989 was not yet out). There was, in fact, no appreciable increase in the number of high-end Stasi operations initiated in 1989, although one might have expected a dramatic increase in Stasi monitoring given the increasingly volatile situation in the Soviet bloc and the exodus. In sum, the Perleberg District Stasi was no more operationally active in 1989 in the ‘exodus’ arena than it had been in previous years in the 1980s.

---

39 Ibid., 143.
41 BStU-Schwerin, BV Schwerin KD Perleberg 10376, 10377. Series of reports on OPKs 1985–1989. ‘Darstellung der politisch-operativen Lage der KD Perleberg’, by Hauptman Giese. BStU-Schwerin, BV Schwerin KD Perleberg. The percentage of OPKs dealing with Applicants to Emigrate was also similar to years past. In 1987, nineteen of forty-six OPKs dealt with Applicants to Emigrate. See ‘OPK Bestandsaufnahme’, 8 July 1987. BStU-Schwerin, BV Schwerin, KD Perleberg 10386, unpaginated.
Although the Stasi was increasingly concerned with those who left the GDR illegally – and certainly some of the eighteen new operations (OPKs) in 1989 would have dealt with these individuals or their families – the situation was not catastrophic. As late as three weeks before the opening of the Wall, fifty residents of Perleberg District had occupied West German embassies in Prague and Warsaw, 107 left via Hungary and thirty-three remained behind on a sanctioned visit to West Germany. In total, a mere 0.3 per cent of the population. The Stasi contented itself with having daily meetings with the police to see who had applied to visit Hungary. Naturally, those who had applied to visit Hungary, and who had also applied to emigrate, were denied a travel permit.42 By early October, these meetings were no longer necessary as the East German government had banned travel to the last permitted Soviet bloc country, Czechoslovakia.

Opposition groups

The ponderous St Jacob’s church in the heart of Perleberg existed quietly through most of the years of the GDR, its spacious interior sparsely populated during church services, with perhaps forty to fifty die-hard churchgoers, almost all of them over the age of fifty. In 1989, however, the mammoth edifice would not be large enough to hold the 2,000 demonstrators who gathered for an evening service. With pews filled beyond capacity and comfort, 600 demonstrators would be forced to crane forward in order to listen from the market square.

Although Werner Ryll, the leader of the Stasi in Perleberg District, was not concerned with church officials leaving East Germany – this becoming a major issue prior to the opening of the Iron Curtain in Hungary – Ryll became increasingly concerned throughout 1989 with the networks that church officials were developing, particularly around an environmental theme. This is demonstrated nowhere more clearly than in the elaborate Stasi operation (OV) Tendenz against the parish minister of Perleberg Gottfried de Haas and his family.

In 1984, the Perleberg District Stasi recruited one of the most successful informants in its history, codenamed ‘Robert’, a man who had been married for three years and had a child. ‘Robert’s illegal activities drew him to the attention of the Stasi and in return for avoiding a prison sentence, ‘Robert’ agreed to inform for the Stasi. Lieutenant Besenbiel of the Perleberg District Stasi office was excited at the prospect of ‘Robert’, because he was still young enough to monitor the situation among the youth of the District.43 A year after his recruitment, ‘Robert’ was assigned to the Junge Gemeinde or Protestant Youth Group where he came in contact with Gottfried de Haas, someone who had already been written up in Stasi files for his interest in

---

42 ‘OPK Bestandsaufnahme’, 8 July 1987. BStU-Schwerin, BV Schwerin, KD Perleberg 10586 (unpaginated).
43 ‘Vorschlag zur Verpflichtung des Kandidaten’, by Leutnant Besenbiel, 11 July 1984. BStU-Schwerin, BV Schwerin 573/94 (unpaginated). Note that due to privacy considerations, researchers are not permitted to know the nature of the crimes that ‘Robert’ was committing that drew the Stasi’s attention to him.
building up the Junge Gemeinde presence in the district. By 1986, ‘Robert’s’ case officer could write with some degree of satisfaction that ‘Robert’ had penetrated the Junge Gemeinde and, equally importantly, had built up a ‘personal relationship’ with de Haas.44

The astonishing result of ‘Robert’s’ long-time friendship with the de Haas family – he and de Haas’ son, Joachim, became fast friends – was his intimate involvement in the establishment of an opposition group centred on an environmental theme. By 1987 the de Haas family was holding regular evening discussions on environmental issues. In 1989 Joachim, through his church contacts, had established a link with a Berlin environmental group founded in 1988, Arche-grün-ökologisches Netzwerk, and wanted to form a Perleberg branch. ‘Robert’ was not only a founding member of the Perleberg branch of Arche but was elected to the co-ordinating committee, in the living room of an ‘Arche’ higher-up of the Berlin branch responsible for all East Germany.45 On his trips to Berlin the Stasi informant would often stay overnight at the flat of this same individual, one of the key figures in the Arche movement as a whole. ‘Robert’ and the three others in the Perleberg group took part in environmental actions, such as photographing the environmental damage caused by Soviet troop movements in the area, writing to city hall to request that more trees be planted or asking Greenpeace to write two million letters to East Germans about the environmental degradation in East Germany. Every aspect of these actions was duly reported back to the Stasi by ‘Robert’.

As a result of this information, the Stasi increased the operation against Gottfried de Haas and his wife (according to the Stasi the ‘dominant’ member of the family), from an OPK, which had been under way since 1985, to the highest level OV in 1987. The catalyst for the increased attention was the interest in the environmental movement combined with de Haas’ church contacts throughout the GDR and even in West Germany.46 ‘Robert’ not only spied on the environmental groups but spent the next two years securing church documents and letters that would reveal de Haas’s contacts. By February 1989 Besenbiel had grown more concerned about the ‘Arche’ group in Perleberg because it had started to move into the political sphere. One evening towards the end of the month, Joachim and the three other ‘Arche’ members met in Joachim’s apartment and drafted a letter to Erich Honecker, the East German leader, requesting that diplomatic relations with Iran be broken off due to the recent call by the Ayatollah Khomeni for the execution of the Indian born British writer Salman Rushdie for his book *The Satanic Verses*.47 ‘Robert’ questioned the merit of the idea but could not push too hard without arousing suspicion.

---

Besenbiel accordingly ordered that ‘Robert’ ensure that no further environmental groups be established in the district, and, in a manner similar to the approach against applicants to Emigrate, suggested that the current ‘Arche’ group in Perleberg be subsumed in the ‘state’s policy of control through the guiding of the group’s actions by the appropriate societal organisations’. In a meeting about OV Tendenz with his superiors in Schwerin, the head of Department XX (responsible for opposition in East Germany) stated that ‘Arche’ did not seem to him to be an enemy organisation yet, and that OV Tendenz should be continued with an eye to reducing the group’s size. In addition, in order to control the regular evenings sponsored by the church on environmental issues, Ryll ordered, first, the use of tactical methods to ‘reveal individuals who were antisocialist and counterrevolutionary’, second, the placing of ‘positive’ individuals at meetings to provide a counterbalance to the general trend and to support ‘the security organs when the necessary dispersal of the gathering takes place’, third, the placing of experts at these meetings to counter arguments put forth, and finally, the removal if need be of the photocopying permit from churches.

For his splendid work Besenbiel recommended that ‘Robert’ be awarded the service medal of the National People’s Army on the fortieth anniversary of the Stasi – an anniversary that never came because of the intervening fall of the Berlin Wall. ‘Robert’ authored his last report for the Stasi on 24 October 1989, in which he reported on a spontaneous demonstration of some 600 residents of Perleberg who had gathered in the streets yelling ‘Gorby! Get rid of the Stasi! We are the People!’ With that, his five years of Stasi work came to an end. ‘Robert’s’ real identity and fate remain unknown.

In June 1989 the Stasi showed no signs of relenting, or indeed of sympathy, towards the demonstrators. On the contrary, the Stasi undertook clear steps to maintain total control. The use of all the organs at the disposal of the state was part and parcel of the implementation of totalitarianism. The Stasi called on the leaders of unions, factory groups and youth organisations to engage their membership more fully in political discussions, in order to curb ‘wayward’ thinking, such as that found in Arche. It is telling that Besenbiel’s terminology to deal with Arche refers to the ‘state’s policy of control’. These actions are certainly mild compared with the brutal techniques of the Soviets and Nazis, and even the East Germans of the 1950s, but the intent remains that of controlling the public sphere. The Stasi aimed at denying to the inhabitants of Perleberg the right to occupy a public space. It seems clear that the security apparatus

---

not only hindered the autonomy of social groups, but sought to destroy any such autonomy.53

**Perleberg’s 750th anniversary celebrations**

During the week of 18–27 August 1989, Perleberg celebrated the 750th anniversary of its founding. One might be tempted to sympathise with the Stasi personnel as they now had to divert its attention to buskers. Festivities which included parades, rock concerts and street performers were expected to attract as many as 30,000 visitors to the town. An elaborate police plan to secure the festivities, including parking control and general crowd security was co-ordinated with the local Stasi branch.54 Fearful of the celebrations turning into public demonstrations against the regime, the head of the Perleberg Stasi office launched ‘Operation City Jubilee 89’ (Aktion Stadtjubiläum 89), to be under his direct supervision. A high-ranking subordinate, Oberstleutnant Fluch, put in place a special committee of seven, including himself, to co-ordinate the efforts.

Individuals who had been denied the right to emigrate (seventy-one in total) formed one of the foci of the operations, perhaps spurred on by one particular individual’s claim that he was going to burn himself publicly for having been denied exit to the West.55 Stasi informants followed the individual during the week of celebrations to monitor him for oppositional behaviour. Apart from the operations under way, Fluch also called for the use of informants against anyone who threatened violence during the festivities, against criminal elements and against all church and/or other ‘hostile–negative’ elements in terms of the ubiquitous Stasi charge of ‘political underground activity’ ([politische Untergrundtätigkeit – PUT](https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms)). Informants were also to monitor tourists in the area, a delegation from Preetz in West Germany seeking partner-city status with Perleberg, journalists, key installations of the people’s economy, including VEB Zellstoff-und Zellwollewerke Wittenberge, VEB Nähmaschinenwerk Wittenberge, VEB Märkische Ölwerke, VEB KVI Wittenberge, GHG WtB Perleberg, VEB Dauermilchwerk, Perleberg, Minoltanklager Perleberg, Umspannwerk Perleberg, Fernmeldeamt Perleberg, UHA Perleberg. Informants in the post office were to be trained to respond to anonymous calls threatening violence. Individuals suspected of escaping over the border were also to be monitored.57

A handwritten note outlined the venues that various informants were to cover.

---


57 Ibid., 6–9.
Informant ‘Alex’ was to monitor youth dances, informants ‘Albert’, ‘Max Krause’, ‘Beate’ and others were to cover the parade. In total, sixty-five informants were employed in operations prior to and on the date of the festivities.

Overall, the eighty celebrations took place largely without incident, although Werner Ryll was aghast that the band Rockhaus from Berlin came on stage to the music of the West German evening news. Operations designed to monitor those who had been refused an exit visa and those who planned to visit the West were by and large successful. Close informant monitoring meant that these individuals did not undertake actions against the regime. Those affiliated with the church were also quiet during the celebrations. Gottfried de Haas, the target of Operation Tendenz, was closely monitored through informants. Although flags (both East German and of the city of Perleberg) were torn down during the festivities, and de Haas arranged two public visits to his church, both of which were relatively well attended, Ryll nevertheless sang the praises of his informants, who conducted their work with ‘energy, discipline and personal devotion’.

Given this extreme level of Stasi involvement in local celebrations and the monitoring of any possible opponents who might disrupt the events, and its deep penetration of oppositional groups and individuals, we see in the Stasi operations an instrument of control that reached far beyond the bounds of a ‘normal’ securing of a public event. Theirs was a secret, intrusive control of individuals who, in the vast majority of cases, had not broken any GDR laws and who were suspect for reasons that would be farcical in a society that allowed even a modicum of free public space.

October 1989

Public demonstrations in Perleberg District remained small and spontaneous until the third week of October 1989, some six or seven weeks behind the major centres of Leipzig, where large, regular demonstrations were being held from the beginning of September, or Dresden, where 10,000 clashed with security forces on 4 October. The Stasi presence in Perleberg remained invisible until the end, unlike in Leipzig, where there was a brief but visible Stasi presence at the big demonstration of 9 October before the Stasi melted into the night and effectively announced the end of attempted totalitarian control. The first major demonstration in the district occurred on 20 October – several days after the SED had shoved Honecker into retirement and placed Egon Krenz at the helm – when 800 people attended a meeting in the...
Lutheran church in Wittenberge to hear two female representatives from Neues Forum, an opposition movement that had been founded in Berlin in September and was spreading throughout East Germany (although would not be formally founded in Perleberg District until after the fall of the Wall). This meeting was followed quickly by those with a similar theme in Bad Wilsnack and in St Jacob’s Church in Perleberg (both securing 500 people). Three days later, 2,000 showed up for a meeting at St Jacob’s church led by Frau de Haas, and finally, on 27 October, in the last major demonstration in the District, 3,000 people crowded into the Lutheran church in Wittenberge, these latter demonstrations similar in size to those in much larger cities such as Erfurt, Rostock, Magdeburg and even the regional capital of Schwerin, where 5,000 people protested on 23 October. It is estimated that in the last week of October, nearly half a million East Germans took to the streets. The meetings in Perleberg District revolved around the platform of Neues Forum and various problems in East Germany. Of these problems, the supply situation and the SED-controlled media topped the list, but other issues came out in discussion, including poor medical facilities and the lack of freedom to travel. The Stasi judged that support for Neues Forum came from youth, medical professionals, the teaching corps, and workers in large factories. After the meetings, the demonstrators paraded through the town in a peaceful fashion and placed candles at the step of the Party building. The non-threatening demonstrations here contrast with those elsewhere in Schwerin Region, where the nervousness of the Stasi officer who penned the report in November 1989 on Neues Forum activities is almost tangible: ‘Demonstrations in District and Region cities – almost without exception – file past SED and MiS buildings . . . shouting ‘Get rid of the Stasi pigs’, ‘Strike them dead’, and ‘The knives have been sharpened’.

Conclusions

Let us now return to the three questions posed at the outset. The reasons behind the collapse of East Germany have rightly occupied historians, the end result of which has been a general consensus that the regime fell due to a combination of public pressure, external pressure and regime implosion. It seems fruitful, then, to examine
the nature of these factors from the documents at hand. What motivated East Germans to take to the streets has been a touch-paper for debate. Some historians have focused exclusively on the lack of consumer goods, but others have sought reasons beyond material considerations. Gale Stokes has written: ‘The reason so many wanted to flee East Germany was fundamentally not economic, however. They were fleeing a stifling sense of powerlessness, the regime’s deadening insistence on capitulation, and the enervating denial of all possibility of idealism and hope.’ Konrad Jarausch also argues that the lower living standards merely reinforced political frustrations. Other historians speak of the relatively decent living standard in East Germany, and point rather to the ‘utter moral rot’ of the regime and to the denial of rights, including that of travel.

From the evidence for Perleberg District, it appears that any explanation of public pressure in the revolution of 1989 must take into account the failing trust between the population and the regime. It was often not solely a poor standard of living, but the combination of this with the overblown SED propaganda that eroded the legitimacy of the regime, and drove angered East German citizens to the streets, as is evidenced in the Stasi analyses of the communal elections of May 1989. Furthermore, according to the Stasi, those who fled the district in the summer of 1989 by and large had few material concerns. By late October 1989, Perleberg District residents were reiterating in medieval churches throughout the district the dichotomy between media claims and the actual supply situation, while also bringing up the poor state of medical care and the lack of freedom to travel. To be sure, there were also instances when standard-of-living issues alone caused hostility to the regime. A twelve-year waiting period for a telephone or the closure of the only local restaurant for months on end due to a lack of spare parts was, for many, simply unbearable. Interestingly, the environmental degradation which caused a small branch of the underground group Arche to form in summer 1989 did not form a focus of discussion in the church meetings of late October. The reason for this is perhaps that Perleberg was not a site of major heavy industry, and thus environmental issues were of less concern. It is worth recalling that the Arche in Perleberg never had more than four members, and that their activities were relatively benign. In contrast, the Arche group in the Halle Region filmed the horrendously scarred landscape around Bitterfeld and smuggled the tape to a West German television station, where it was broadcast.

---


Failing trust is visible not only in Stasi documents that deal primarily with oppositional views in the population, but, remarkably, also in Stasi reports on those who opposed the drift towards revolution. Many were extremely concerned about developments in Poland and Hungary, supported China’s use of armed force to confront demonstrators on Tiananmen Square, and generally approved of a more vigorous East German response to opposition at home. How parents could risk taking their children on a wild journey through Hungary and into Austria was beyond the comprehension of many. Some even went so far as to ask why the regime did not counteract the flood of citizens leaving by reporting on what had happened to those who ended up in the West. They expected that those who fled would be unemployed and dependent on soup kitchens. Broadcasting this message might stem the tide. Workers at the Wittenberge railway station considered Hungary’s opening of the border to Austria to be treasonous. Even those who sought a more robust SED response to the exodus, however, criticized the SED for a lack of openness and honesty toward its own citizens. As one report, authored two days after the GDR had restricted East German travel to Czechoslovakia on 3 October 1989, stated, ‘Over and over again citizens have expressed the view that people need to hear honest and open opinions’. As another report to the central agency in Berlin that analysed the situation in the GDR said, the SED had to retreat from its ‘propaganda of success’. ‘The truth’, the report suggested, ‘is easier to digest’. This point bears stating explicitly. Even hard-core supporters of communism, those who wanted a bloody suppression of the now cresting revolutionary wave, wanted the regime to exhibit greater honesty; it should not surprise us that this stimulus would also bring opponents to the streets.


The Stasi reported that Egon Krenz’s replacement of Erich Honecker as general secretary of the central committee of the SED on 18 October 1989 found broad support in the population: ‘An overwhelming section of the population expressed support for this step’. Many were delighted with the apparent openness that accompanied the change at the helm, as citizens throughout the district voiced approval of the more open television reporting. Failing trust should take its place alongside an abysmal supply situation, denied rights and political frustration as a cause of public protest.

In assessing the balance between external factors, popular pressure and regime implosion, the study of this district, away from the limelight of Berlin and Leipzig, suggests that the pressure exerted by the international situation – as manifested in the issue of exodus – was not a key factor in the revolution. From a strictly numerical perspective, not quite 200 fled the district by October 1989, whereas in one week in October Perleberg District would witness demonstrations involving roughly 6,000 people. Certainly, one is struck by the fact that those applying to emigrate did not form a core of organised protests in Perleberg as was the case in, for example, Dresden. If one considers the chronology, the trigger for demonstrators in Perleberg District to take to the streets appears closely linked to the successful Leipzig demonstration of 9 October, and even more closely to the removal of Honecker on 18 October. It is worth remembering that the first major demonstration in the district took place two days after Honecker’s removal, and that the ending on 3 October of travel without a visa to the last country (Czechoslovakia) for which this had been possible passed relatively unnoticed. From this we may draw the conclusion that the experience of demonstrators elsewhere in the land, who did so with impunity, meant that Perlebergers became bolder. An engineer from Wurzen summed up the feelings of many in East Germany: ‘I heard on the late night news that there were over 70,000 at that demonstration in Leipzig and that it went off without incident. I poured myself one big Slibovic. I somehow knew that this was the end of the GDR.’

A key piece of evidence for the argument that freedom to travel – an issue thrust on to the table by the changing international situation – was not at the heart of the Perleberg District protests, nor the state’s measures of control in this district in 1989, is Werner Ryll’s plan for 1990, authored in September 1989 after Hungary had fully opened its border to the West. Where Ryll saw his priorities is striking.

84 Ross accurately points out that the balance of these elements (rather than the denial of the importance of one or the other) is what separates historians. Ross’s account suggests priority for the changing international situation in providing the framework for demise. Ross, East German Dictatorship, 135.
85 Grix, Role of the Masses, 138.
86 Timmer, Vom Aufbruch zum Umbruch, 189.
He foresaw an elaborate plan to secure the tissue factory in Wittenberge, which was undergoing technological upgrades. Roughly the same amount of the workplan is dedicated to the fight against ‘underground political activity’ (PUT), whereby Ryll called for more attention and resources to key OV and OPKs to reduce the scope of opposition around these individuals. Ryll envisaged a continuing effort to apply pressure on those who applied to emigrate (AstAs) to withdraw their application, and to reduce the numbers leaving East Germany illegally. Stasi officers were to determine who had already left and to trace and monitor their relations and friends in East Germany. Ryll’s calm projection of quarterly – not more frequent – reports on this subject for 1990, it should be recalled, was issued after Hungary fully opened its border to Austria. In essence, Ryll called for no more serious measures against the exodus than in years past, and the place of exodus was not noticeably prominent in his work plan for 1990.87

As with the nature of the revolution, the nature of control in East Germany also does not lend itself to easy answers. Few would dispute that the Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands – SED) exercised a monopoly on power. Fewer still would argue against the fact that the German Democratic Republic was indeed a dictatorship. But here unanimity ends. Whether East Germany was a totalitarian dictatorship by 1989, or whether it might be better characterized as a ‘welfare dictatorship’ (Konrad Jarausch), a ‘post-totalitarian bureaucratic dictatorship’ (Ralf Dahrendorf), ‘a forced-through society’ (Klaus Schröder) or a ‘thoroughly ruled society’ (Alf Lüdtke) remain contentious issues.88 Moreover, the term ‘totalitarian’ appears to have too much of a past for some historians, laden as it is with cold war overtones. Recent literature has tended to emphasise the impossibility of total control, pointing instead to the boundaries of dictatorship, to those points at which society becomes impenetrable.89 These arguments in many ways, however, support a closer examination of the totalitarian concept. The concept was developed to demonstrate the intentions of regimes, rather than their achievements. As Martin Malia has succinctly put it: ‘Totalitarianism does not mean that such regimes in fact exercise total control over the population; it means rather that such control is their

87 ‘Zuarbeit für den Plan 1990’, signed by Ryll, 20 Sep. 1989. BStU-Schwerin, BV Schwerin, KD Perleberg, 10590, 26–42. Karsten Timmer argues that illegal exodus was the ‘critical event’ in the fall of the regime, although the evidence presented here suggests that the exodus did not affect the GDR uniformly and, accordingly, different districts had different priorities. Timmer, Vom Aufbruch zum Umbrauch, 193.
89 A classic example of this approach is Richard Bessel and Ralph Jessen eds., Die Grenzen der Diktatur: Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996.)
aspiration’. If society is indeed ‘pushing back’, then an examination of those areas might fruitfully suggest where the regimes intended to control.

Recently historians of the GDR seem to have entered into a ‘post-totalitarian’ phase – while not abandoning the intellectual guideposts established by scholarship on totalitarianism – in a pattern reminiscent of how Holocaust historians have moved the ‘intentionalist/functionalist’ debate into territory exploring whether the trip-wire for murderous action is to be found in 1941 or early 1942. GDR historians have analysed the multiplicity of GDR society, the various accommodations that the regime was required to make to segments of society and the general, mundane, day-to-day experience of most GDR citizens that suggests at least some level of coexistence. As one historian has written, ‘Life in the GDR was ordinary for the majority of the population’. For these historians, the true experience of the vast majority of GDR citizens was away from the political sphere, in a private life of making do, and, at times, demonstrating a certain degree of loyalty. Eigen-Sinn, or sense of one’s self, often collided with the regime’s political dominance (Herrschaft), and both sides sought ways of accommodating this phenomenon. On occasion, the ruling SED, in the interest of stability, was required to make accommodations to various segments of society, whether in the form of allowing rock concerts for youth or more freedom in the cultural sphere for writers and artists, or allowing renegade church leaders to continue initiatives that were not in line with state policy. For what was arguably the most important social group from the SED’s point of view,

90 Martin Malia, ‘To the Stalin Mausoleum’, Daedalus, 119 (Winter 1990), 295–344. John Connelly has suggested that, in the East German case, the motivation for totalitarian control in the university sector was closely linked to the anti-fascist basis of the GDR: ‘Rage born in the Nazi years combined with faith in state intervention and united anti-fascists with the partially nazified SED apparatus in an attempt to control the thinking of colleagues and students.’ Moreover, Connelly is correct to suggest that analyses of control in the GDR would do well to take into account the level of control in other East European states, rather than comparing East Germany solely with the abstract concept of totalitarianism. See John Connelly, Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945–1956 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 285.

91 Thomas Lindenberger has criticised the Enquete-Commission for portraying the GDR in terms of victims and perpetrators. He suggests that most GDR citizens did not see their own experience reflected in those categories. See Thomas Lindenberger, ‘Everyday History: New Approaches to the History of the Post–War Germanies’, in Christoph Klessmann, ed., The Divided Past: Rewriting Post-War German History (New York: Berg, 2001), 53.

92 Jeannette Madarasz, Conflict and Compromise in East Germany 1971–1989: A Precarious Stability (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 195. Thomas Lindenberger is also a strong proponent of examining the myriad experiences of GDR society, rather than viewing it as a monolithic whole, and has pointed to the need for both the regime and societal groups to seek mutual accommodation and coexistence. He has modified Bessel and Jessen’s characterisation of the GDR, calling it a ‘dictatorship of boundaries’. Of his many publications, see in particular Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur: Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1999), and Völkspolizei: Herrschaftspraxis und öffentliche Ordnung im SED-Staat 1952–1968 (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2003)

93 Madarasz, Conflict and Compromise, 192.


95 Madarasz in her book examines the compromises with four segments of society: women, youth, church and writers. See p. 92 above.
the workers, this translated into a certain degree of power for that group vis-à-vis the regime in terms of working conditions and wages.\(^{96}\) In short, many historians do not see in the SED a totalitarian party that aimed to control all aspects of society, but rather a flexible albeit dictatorial ruler that was prepared to accommodate where need be. In this approach, however, pervasive state control is pushed into the background by the fact that ordinary citizens went about their gardening. Here, historians should be exceedingly cautious, since a focus on the mundane can easily divert attention from greater historical forces and events. The lessons of the Historikerstreit in this regard are crucial – in particular, the assertion that the Holocaust did not really alter the day-to-day existence of most Germans – even though the historical eras are fundamentally different.

This study of Perleberg has demonstrated that this tiny, ordinary area of East Germany was a place of pervasive and obsessive state control. There was, of course, a certain level of mundane coexistence between rulers and ruled in the final year of the regime, and the regime did occasionally give the appearance of accommodation, as we have seen. This accommodation was, however, carefully guided and controlled; the limits were established by the regime. Freedom to manoeuvre within a ‘sphere of accommodation’ meant little in Perleberg where an intimate family friend reported all church- and environment-related activities to the Stasi, where the Stasi worked closely with factory superiors to encourage candidates to withdraw their application to emigrate, where the Stasi threatened removal of photocopy permits, where Stasi informants danced cheek-to-cheek with other youths at a rock concert, and where evening meetings relating to the environment were crawling with Stasi informants. In this regard, the SED state might be likened to Las Vegas. An unassuming poker player might be permitted to win an occasional hand to keep them at the table, but ultimately the House will win.

Critics of the application of the totalitarianism concept are correct to point out that there are significant differences between the mass-murdering regimes of the Nazis and Soviets in the 1930s and 1940s, and the East German regime of the late 1980s. This does not in itself mean that the totalitarian concept is inapplicable. Rather, as political philosophers have argued, the heart of the concept is less that of mass murder, but rather that of total control.\(^{97}\) Even Hannah Arendt’s famous ‘iron band of terror’ assertion can be distorted; the context is one of robbing popular freedom to manoeuvre: ‘By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them; compared to the condition within its iron band, even the desert of tyranny, insofar as it is still some kind of space, appears like a guarantee of freedom. Totalitarian government... destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom.


which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space’. At the most basic level, it is worth remembering that Arendt’s term was ‘totalitarianism’ rather than ‘terrorist state’ or something similar which would emphasize the method by which intentions were achieved. Arendt’s term relates closely to the desire to control spontaneous group formation in society.

Absent in the most recent wave of literature on everyday history in East Germany as it relates to the totalitarianism concept is precisely this idea to which Arendt refers, what would today be termed ‘civil society’. Clearly, totalitarian states cannot control every minute of every individual’s day. Yet in many ways, it is to this ‘atomic’ level of society, the individual niche, or its associated limited social group, that some historians turn in negating the totalitarian concept. Sigrid Meuschel has said, in contrast, ‘It was not the State that withered away in the course of decades of Party rule, but society,’ a statement that tends toward exaggeration. What is becoming clear is that some form of ‘underground civil society’ existed at least during the later years of the GDR, and helps to account for the speedy appearance of a number of opposition groups such as Neues Forum in 1989.

Some historians have argued that the totalitarianism concept is of limited analytical use because it deals solely with stated claims of a regime, rather than the often haphazard implementation of those aims. The fluid concept of power, and societal interplay with the instruments of the state, have been at the heart of Robert Gellately’s pathbreaking works on the Gestapo. It appears to me, however, that models such as totalitarianism can explain the behaviour of the regime over a given period while addressing the interaction between society and regime. As the above discussion of Perleberg District demonstrates, the Stasi is indeed often responding to societal developments – new opposition groups that have formed, applications to emigrate, exodus, community festivals – yet what guides its myriad approaches to these issues is nevertheless a desire for control of the public sphere. Different strategies and taking account of new elements do not necessarily detract from the overall goal. The brutal repression of the 1950s gave way in the 1980s to refined repression techniques aimed at the prevention of hostile behaviour (feindlich-negative Haltung), which centred on the use of informants to monitor and to isolate individuals and, if possible, to convert them. As we have seen above, the Stasi also turned to societal organisations such as factory bosses, communist youth groups and the trade union to control popular action including such benign activities as casting a ballot, requesting that more trees

be planted, applying to emigrate – in short, acting in society. Scholars should not confuse updated surveillance and control techniques with a fundamental shift away from previous goals. Arent's criterion of totalitarianism as a regime's intention to rob the population of freedom to manoeuvre thus remains a useful one.

Moreover, as important as the descriptor (totalitarian, forced-through society, etc.) historians choose for the GDR, is the perception of the regime by East German citizens. Even if East Germans led 'ordinary lives' and accommodated themselves to the regime, there was overwhelming secret police pressure to do so, and East Germans knew this. East Germans thought that they were being monitored by the regime. The fact that millions of East Germans have applied to the Stasi archives (formerly most often referred to as Gauk-Behörde, now Birthler-Behörde), assuming that the Stasi had something on them, cannot be written off as macabre fascination, but would better be seen as a broad public acknowledgement of a pervasive secret police presence. This subjective belief clearly had implications for the way in which East Germans led their lives. It is also clear from the course of the revolution of 1989, when regional Stasi offices were stormed in December, followed by the headquarters in January 1990, that East Germans thought the Stasi had files worth protecting. They did not storm SED archives. East Germans wanted Stasi files preserved because they saw them as records about themselves, not because they worried about destruction of bureaucratic directives or (alas) because they wanted to secure them for future historians.

The final question posed at the outset dealt with the Stasi’s role in the revolution. Many see in the downfall of East Germany a delightful irony – a regime with an all-knowing, all-powerful secret police came crashing down into little pieces, just like the Wall it had caused to be built. The answer to this riddle, for some, is Stasi incompetence. As the above discussion suggests, however, the course of the revolution in Perleberg District should lead us away from the conclusion that the Stasi was inept, that myopic Marxist ideologues were gathering reams of ‘wrong’ information, or were not able to interpret the information properly. Stasi officers gathered information from men and women who often became seasoned informants (like ‘Robert’), and passed key elements of this information on to both appropriate line departments, such as Department XX responsible for internal opposition, and to the local officers responsible for information and analysis (Auswertung und Information), who in turn fed the digested information on to the Auswertung- und Kontrollgruppe (AKG) at the Regional Stasi office in Schwerin, headed from 1981 to 1990 by Oberstleutnant Siegfried Troll. There is much in the Perleberg District documents

104 This is a key point in Kuhrt, Die SED-Herrschaft. See Karl Lammers’s review essay, ‘The German Democratic Republic as History’, Contemporary European History, 6, 3 (1997), 424.
105 Madarasz believes that the Stasi was a key institution for keeping the Party informed of popular developments, although she downplays the accuracy of the information given its ideological blinkers. See Madarasz, Conflict and Compromise.
106 The line ‘departments’ at the district level were in many cases just one individual officer, or a small Referat. Gieseke, Mielke-Konzern, 135. The regional AKGs were the important base units of the powerful Zentrale Auswertungs- und Informationsgruppe (ZAIG), the main department in Berlin charged since
to suggest a high degree of competency on the part of Stasi officers in their analysis of incoming information. They filtered the static of myriad complaints about the supply situation and consumer goods to issue a special report on the abysmal situation in Wittenberge, and to draw attention to the negative effect of the regime’s ceaseless propaganda. On the Wittenberge situation, the local Stasi office indicated that the supply problems existed in large part because of an insufficient number of bakeries, poor cooling equipment in grocery stores, and the wrong cleaning machines in the brewery, not because of saboteurs and agents. They also flagged the complaints of fundamental supporters of the regime. Their knowledge of the environmental group ‘Arche’ was up to date and comprehensive; the surveillance of would-be emigrants was wide-ranging. Not everything in the Stasi reports is ideologically tainted and as such it was indeed an important (one-way) line of communication between the population and the Party. In short, the information-gathering apparatus at the district level continued to serve the Stasi well in 1989, as it had for thirty-six years (since the 1953 revolution). Perhaps understandably, Werner Ryll and his leading officers in Perleberg District would have concluded that they were doing something right.

When the regime failed to act against the 9 October demonstrations in Leipzig – probably because the upcoming Party leadership under Egon Krenz had little desire to be in charge of an internationally isolated police state – the Perleberg District Stasi’s room to deal with opposition diminished considerably. Only then did feelings of resentment, uncertainty and helplessness come to pervade the Stasi. It became ineffectual as the SED decided to forego serious action against opponents.

Other historians have suggested that the Stasi ‘failure’ in 1989 was not due to incompetence (ideological or not), but rather to internal Stasi questions about its raison d’être, bringing into question the extent to which the Stasi was a reliable instrument of control in 1989. Edward Peterson has written, ‘[The Stasi’s] advocacy, even before the Wall came down, of more freedom and democracy is impressive’. Although stopping short of calling the Stasi conspirators in 1989, as others have done, Peterson still brings to the fore the question of the totalitarian convictions

1978 with collecting and analysing information on the population, and providing this information to the political decision-makers. See BStU, Anatomie der Staatssicherheit: Die Organisationsstruktur des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit 1989 (Berlin: BStU, 1996), 39.


110 Gieseke points to the gradual erosion of the Stasi’s room for manoeuvre in the 1980s because of the increasing ties to West Germany, and the desire not to become an international pariah. Gieseke, Mielke-Konzern, 229–39.

111 Peterson, Secret Police, 268.

112 The discovery following that revolution that key opposition figures had links to the Stasi – such as Minister President Lothar de Maziere, the lawyer Wolfgang Schnur, and the speaker for the newly formed Social Democratic Party, Ibrahim Böhne, led in part to this conspiracy theory, formulated initially by the journalist Henryk Broder. See Mitter and Wolle, Untergang, 530–3, and reiterated in Wolle, Die heile Welt.
of the Stasi in 1989. Other historians have argued vociferously against this viewpoint. ‘Although it is noteworthy’, states a leading German historian, ‘that ideological doubts were articulated in the Ministry for State Security in a manner unseen since the 1950s, nothing suggests that it wanted to abandon its role as the most reliable instrument of the Party. The idea of implementing legal and democratic rights was... deeply foreign to the Chekist manner of thinking’.\(^{113}\)

There is little in the documents to suggest that the Stasi was unreliable, let alone part of a conspiracy to overthrow the regime. As late as 4 October, the regional level was providing clear guidelines to the districts on penetrating oppositional groups and rendering them harmless. According to Hans-Hermann Hertle, in the most detailed account available on the fall of the Wall, the Stasi failed to open fire on the demonstrators of 9 October in Leipzig not because it lacked the will, but because it was overwhelmed by the demonstrators’ numbers.\(^{114}\) Karsten Timmer argues along similar lines, adding that the peaceful protest helped avoid an escalation. If the demonstrators had attacked the Stasi would have retaliated.\(^{115}\) On 2 November, Egon Krenz instructed the Stasi to disperse all meetings of Neues Forum since it was not a sanctioned group.\(^{116}\) The leader of the nearby Potsdam Region ordered the use of force to protect Stasi installations as late as 30 October 1989,\(^{117}\) and a mere seven days before the fall of the Berlin Wall, he ordered the use of weapons to prevent a breakthrough at the border.\(^{118}\)

In our ongoing debates about the revolution of 1989, the nature of control in the GDR, and the role of the Stasi as the GDR teetered towards the brink, it is important to recall the amazing speed with which the revolution descended on the more ‘typical’ outlying areas of East Germany. In his majestic account of post-unification Germany, *Too Far Afield*, Günter Grass has pronounced 1989 as ‘no ordinary year’. By its close this description certainly seemed appropriate. What is remarkable is how uneventful prior to October that year was in Perleberg District. The Stasi there were as surprised

338. Mitter and Wolle point, however, to a lack of evidence to support the theory of a Stasi conspiracy to overthrow the East German regime. The conspiracy theory has also been dismantled in Walter Süß, ‘Selbstblockierung der Macht’, in Konrad Jarasch and M. Sabrow, eds., *Weg in den Untergang* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999). Mike Dennis’ recent *The Stasi: Myth and Reality* (London: Pearson, 2003), 231, calls the conspiracy theory ‘unsatisfactory’. Peterson’s recent work may open the door to new conspiracy theories.


116 Memorandum of 2 November 1989 from head of BV Potsdam, Schickart, to all KD. BStU-Potsdam, BV-Potsdam, KD Gransee, SACH 264, 3–6.


118 BV Leader to KD Leaders, 2 Nov. 1989. BStU-Potsdam, BV Potsdam, KD Gransee, SACH 264, 7.
as anyone at the fall of the Wall. They fully expected to author a mundane end-of-year report. Although the international climate was shifting, the year 1989 was, until mid-October, more ‘ordinary’ than unusual for Perleberg’s Stasi. The onset of large demonstrations in the district in the third week of October, and a flurry of directives from the Berlin headquarters to all regions to control the spread of demonstrations, would cause an increase in the monitoring of meetings for the few weeks up to the fall of the Wall. Up to this point, however, the Stasi relied on its two key operational mechanisms (OPK and OV) to keep an eye on suspect individuals, and did not initiate appreciably more acts of surveillance than it had in previous year. Moreover, the number who had fled the district was minimal.

For most of 1989 the Stasi simply did not judge the situation in the district to be beyond its control, an opinion that was captured on 31 August when Mielke inquired from his officers whether they thought that an uprising similar to that of 17 June 1953 was approaching. The head of Gera Region responded, ‘it hasn’t, and it won’t arrive, that’s what we’re here for’.

The complacency that runs through SED reports on the situation in East Germany was rapidly replaced by a sober assessment of crisis following the Leipzig demonstration on 9 October. Until then the highest levels of the party believed that the situation was in hand, although there had been major unrest prior to 9 October. The absence of a sense of foreboding among the Perleberg Stasi is more understandable because it was intimately involved with opposition elements and because the district had not exhibited major signs of unrest. Perhaps the most interesting conclusion from these rich records is that Perleberg showed few signs of escalation towards revolution. The fudged communal elections results produced no protest, the only serious opposition group (Arche) was miniscule, residents were not stampeding to Hungary and the Stasi office went about its work with, perhaps, a slightly greater sense of urgency. In a report exuding confidence less than one month before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and only three days after the largest demonstration on East German soil since the revolution of 1953, the Perleberg Stasi stated categorically, ‘In our district, the state is secure’. There is no reason to doubt that its officers honestly believed this. When one reflects on the sudden surge of mass demonstrations in Perleberg and the corresponding collapse of state power a word comes to mind that is well known to students of German history – this was a Blitzrevolution, a lightning revolution.

121 Popplewell, ‘Stasi’, 56.
122 Hertle, *Der Fall der Mauer*, 117.