The consummate careerist: Erich Mielke, the German Democratic Republic’s Minister for State Security

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SPY CHIEFS

Volume 2

INTELLIGENCE LEADERS in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia

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Erich Mielke served as the minister for state security of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1957 to 1989, making him one of the longest-serving intelligence chiefs in history. He was one of the most important people in the State Security Ministry (or Stasi) for even longer than that since it was he who, in 1949, chose the ministry’s senior officers as the Stasi was being formed. In reality, he was as much a servant as a leader: he was able to preside over the Stasi for forty years because he was the loyal functionary of two superiors, the East German Communist Party, known as the Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED), and the Soviet security service, the KGB (Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti: Committee for State Security). He imposed on his ministry obedience to the party and loyalty to the Soviet Union. Since the Stasi was very much the KGB’s creation, the mentality and methods of the two agencies were the same. Mielke’s role as minister was to impose on the Stasi the political culture of the SED and the organizational culture of the KGB. Although he was a mediocre leader, his role in the Stasi’s history was nonetheless important.

When the Stasi was created by a law of the GDR’s parliament, the Volkskammer, in February 1950, Mielke was a strong candidate for the position of minister. He was not chosen because he did not enjoy the confidence of the Soviets, who then dominated the fledgling East German security agencies. Wilhelm Zaisser became the first GDR minister for state security because the Soviets trusted him. When Zaisser was dismissed in July 1953, he was succeeded by another German Communist, Ernst Wollweber, who also enjoyed the Russians’ confidence more than Mielke did. Only when the Russians allowed the East German Communist leader, Walter Ulbricht, to choose his own security minister did Mielke achieve that position, which he did in November 1957. Significantly, he achieved it as Ulbricht’s placeman.
This chapter will consider, first, why Mielke held the position of minister for state security for so long and, second, how well he led the Stasi.

The Servant of Two Masters: Mielke’s Longevity as Minister

The position of GDR state security minister was, politically, a very sensitive one. The appointee had to safeguard both East German and Soviet interests. The first two ministers failed to satisfy both of these masters. Mielke succeeded in doing so (though in easier circumstances), which is why he lasted so long in the position.

Zaisser, the first state security minister, was appointed to the position owing to his loyal service to the USSR: he was a long-serving agent of the Soviet military intelligence service, the GRU (Glavnoye Razvedivatelnoye Upravleniye: Main Intelligence Directorate), who had commanded one of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War and had been employed in political reeducation work among German prisoners of war during the Second World War. He was dismissed because the popular uprising of June 17, 1953, which the Stasi failed either to predict or to prevent, humiliated the East German Communist regime and discredited him. Wollweber, his successor, had also demonstrated his loyalty to the Soviet Union as head of a maritime sabotage organization during the years of the Nazi regime. During the war he took refuge in Sweden, but the Nazis forced the Swedish government to imprison him, which wrecked Wollweber’s health. He was an intelligent, assertive, and decisive man who reorganized the Stasi and improved its effectiveness. Though a successful minister, he was fired in 1957 because the East German leader, Walter Ulbricht, wanted his own man at the Stasi’s helm. Wollweber’s health was so bad that he could not put up much of a fight. The Soviet Communist regime was willing to allow Ulbricht to have his way.1

Mielke succeeded Wollweber. The KGB had misgivings about Mielke, considering him deceitful; the KGB rezident (station chief) in the GDR from 1953 to 1957, Yevgeni Pitovranov, considered him “crafty and insincere.”2 Mielke had tried to conceal aspects of his past, such as his brother’s suicide in 1955. He had also spent the war in France, where the Soviets had had no contact with him. Residence in the West was always a black mark in their book because it exposed people to Western influence. To make matters worse, Mielke had been interned by the Germans when they occupied Vichy France, and the Soviets did not know for how long he had been in their hands. The two most
important Soviets in East Germany—Colonel General Vasili Chuikov, the head of the Soviet Control Commission, and his political adviser Vladimir Semyonov—were both sufficiently concerned about Mielke’s time in France to report it to Stalin in January 1950, when the matter of who the East German minister of state security should be came before the Soviet Politburo. The Soviets finally acquiesced in 1957 to Mielke’s appointment because Ulbricht insisted.

Mielke overcame this mistrust, which was one of the great successes of his career. Since we have no access to the KGB’s records, we do not know precisely when or how he won their confidence. Nevertheless, it is clear that he stayed in office for so long because his subservience satisfied the leaders of the SED and the success of his ministry satisfied the Russians. By the early 1970s, at the latest, he enjoyed the Soviets’ favor. They gave him their highest honor, the Order of Lenin, four times: first in 1973, then in 1982, then in 1985, and for the last time in 1987. It is noteworthy that the Order was first awarded to him late in his career in GDR state security — after sixteen years as minister (half of his time in that position). He was also awarded the USSR’s Order of
the Red Banner four times. In 1987, the USSR’s president, Andrei Gromyko, also awarded him the honorary title of “Hero of the Soviet Union.” General Secretary Erich Honecker was firmly of the view that, during his leadership of the SED, Mielke was held in high regard in Moscow.

The main reason his stock rose with the Soviets was evidently that he sought consistently to meet their security needs. Ernst Wollweber had disagreed with the KGB about how much surveillance was needed in the GDR, arguing that the regime was secure and that the Stasi’s full-time staff and informer network could both be reduced in size. Mielke, by contrast, shared the Soviets’ concern about Western ideological influence and pressed for very extensive social surveillance carried out by a very large informer network—indeed, he may have gone even further than the Soviets wanted in expanding his ministry and its stock of informers. The Stasi’s main task became to ward off Western ideological influence, which Mielke damned as politisch-ideologische Diversion (political-ideological diversion, or PID for short). The KGB agreed with him on the importance of the task and even adopted the term itself. The Soviet regime, from Khrushchev down, was alarmed at the upsurge in opposition and the collapse in the authority of the satellite regimes that de-Stalinization had produced. The Soviet leaders realized that the satellite regimes’ standing as Soviet puppets made them deeply unpopular with their peoples. In an attempt to reduce this unpopularity, they gave the satellites more freedom of action. However, they also insisted that strong efforts be made to secure the satellite peoples from harmful Western influences; the same policy was pursued in the Soviet Union itself. Simple institutional interest also pressed for such a policy. The KGB had no interest in maintaining that the Soviet regime was secure and, in the absence of real opposition, tended to invent it. It could do so because that message was very welcome at the top of the party.

The same combination of insecurity and political dogmatism on the part of the Communist leadership and the institutional interest of the security service was at work in the GDR. Mielke personified both tendencies. Under his leadership of the Stasi, any criticism of the regime or “actually existing Socialism” was unacceptable and was ascribed to a counterrevolutionary movement directed by the Western intelligence services.

Under Mielke, the Stasi followed the KGB’s lead in security policy and worked closely with its Soviet partner, supplying it with much valuable information. Throughout the 1960s the KGB was as concerned as Mielke about the extent of Western influence on the Soviet Bloc, including the GDR. It was concerned about all the ways in which Western ideas seeped into the bloc: tourism (particularly trips by Eastern Europeans to the West), letter-writing, scientific and cultural exchanges, political propaganda, and most of all, radio and television broadcasts. In the KGB’s eyes, there were no greater enemies
than Radio Liberty and the World Service of the BBC. Evidently relying on figures provided by the Hungarian security service, the Államvédelmi Hatóság (ÁVH), the KGB’s view in the 1960s was that more than 20 percent of young Hungarians listened to Western radio broadcasts. For the KGB, as for Mielke, any nonconformity with the party line was unacceptable; it classified such nonconformity as either “harmful attitudes” or “hostile acts.” The two categories together encompassed all criticism of Communist society, and statistics were kept on both. The KGB reported that in 1965 and 1966 young people in Hungary had been guilty of approximately 87,000 “harmful attitudes” and “hostile acts.”

Mielke’s conservative Communism chimed exactly with the outlook of Yuri Andropov, who served as chairman of the KGB from 1967 to 1982. Andropov had been Soviet ambassador to Hungary when the revolution broke out there in 1956, and from then on he had been convinced that dissidence, which he saw as ideological subversion encouraged and organized by the West, represented a grave threat to the Soviet Bloc. The outbreak of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in 1968 confirmed him in this belief. Mielke worked closely with Andropov, who for his part cultivated Mielke, recognizing the Stasi’s importance and prizing both Mielke’s reliability and the stability his ministry had created in the GDR. The KGB and Stasi signed important agreements on cooperation during Andropov’s time as KGB chairman, reflecting his respect for the Stasi and its achievements.

From 1967 until Andropov’s death in 1984 the Stasi marched in step with the KGB in its efforts to defeat dissidence. The Stasi’s readiness to get rid of dissidents by depriving them of their GDR citizenship, rather than by imprisoning them, followed the KGB’s example. The trend began in the USSR with the dispatch of Viktor Krasin into exile in 1973 and that of Alexander Solzhenitsyn in February 1974 (Andropov had wanted to expel Solzhenitsyn from the USSR since he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970). The GDR followed suit in November 1976, when the singer Wolf Biermann was deprived of his citizenship while on tour in West Germany.

Indeed, from the 1960s until the collapse of the SED regime, the Stasi’s policy toward dissidence was that of the KGB. Both regimes sought to preserve the fiction that they enjoyed public support. They tried to refrain from brutal repression and mass arrests, and adhered to legality, at least for as long as it suited them. They sought to prevent dissidence or unwelcome developments (such as applications to emigrate) from manifesting themselves rather than suppress them once they appeared. Surveillance rose in importance as a way of obtaining early warning of them. The security services made much greater efforts to intimidate dissidents to rethink their plans and would-be emigrants to withdraw their applications. By contrast, less use was made of
arrests and prosecutions; the prosecutions that did take place were very carefully prepared. Well-known dissidents were often publicly discredited rather than prosecuted. From the mid-1960s on, the KGB publicly used the English word “dissidents” to describe such people, in an attempt to present them as agents of Western intelligence services and as people under foreign influence rather than as true representatives of Soviet public opinion. The danger of Western espionage was energetically publicized to provide an excuse for the prohibition on most Soviet and East German citizens traveling abroad. The ideas conveyed by the Western mass media were damned as “ideological sabotage” designed to undermine the Communist regimes, and the media themselves were presented as under the control of the Western secret services.

Mielke’s efforts in the 1960s to improve the education and professional training of Stasi officers also followed the KGB’s lead. A telling example is the trend on the part of Stasi interrogators from the 1960s on to make greater use of psychological influence to win the cooperation of their victims (Mielke had himself been a brutal interrogator in the 1950s). Again, from Khrushchev’s time onward, the KGB’s insistence on observing “Socialist legality”—or seeming to, at least—was the reason for this move away from brutality to a more correct approach.

The emphasis on surveillance rather than trials did not suit Mielke’s aggressive, brutal personality. He was characteristically heavy-handed in building up his service and its informer network. By the 1980s, the Stasi, with its staff of 80,000, had one security official for every 180 GDR citizens; the KGB, by contrast, had one security official for every 600 Soviet citizens. Mielke deliberately created a service that closely resembled its Soviet parent.

Mielke’s stock undoubtedly also rose with the Soviets because of his service’s impressive record in maintaining the GDR’s security. The threat the KGB most feared was political subversion, and here the GDR’s record was good. Unlike Poland or Hungary or Czechoslovakia, from 1953 to 1989 the GDR did not experience any popular uprising or repudiation of Communism on the part of the regime. The Soviets were also morbidly afraid of the prospect of an American nuclear attack; gathering military intelligence became the top priority of the Stasi’s foreign intelligence collection in the mid-1970s, and the East Germans achieved striking successes. The Soviets were very impressed by the military intelligence they collected, particularly on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the NATO forces in Western Europe, and their weaponry. The intelligence obtained by the Stasi’s best sources was even better than that obtained by the KGB’s spies in NATO. The Warsaw Pact’s forces were, accordingly, very well informed about the NATO forces in Western Europe; if it had come to war, they would have greatly profited from this intelligence. Knowing its value, Mielke presented the best intelligence to
Andropov personally. He was here taking credit for successes for which he was certainly not responsible. He was fortunate that it was he who was minister when, in the late 1950s, the Stasi’s Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung (HVA) first started to achieve real success in collecting high-grade intelligence in West Germany.

The KGB was also impressed by the Stasi’s successes in counterintelligence: it penetrated the intelligence services of West Germany and managed to arrest a very large number of Western spies, thereby enhancing the security of not only the GDR but the rest of the Soviet Bloc as well. The Stasi’s counterintelligence units worked closely with Soviet counterintelligence agencies (both of the KGB and GRU) in the USSR and East Germany. By the late 1950s the Stasi’s counterintelligence departments were so skillful that even the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has paid tribute to them. Mielke, who was heavily involved in counterintelligence, can take some of the credit for his ministry’s skill in this field.

In sum, it was under Mielke’s leadership that the Stasi established itself as the second most important security service in the Soviet Bloc; unlike other satellite security services, it was a genuine partner of the KGB, not a mere subordinate. Mielke expected—and got—deference from KGB officers. The success of his ministry secured his position as minister.

How Well Did Mielke Lead the Stasi?

For a remarkably long period Mielke led an organization that contributed substantially to the political stability of the GDR and the military capability of the Warsaw Pact. Does it follow from this that he was an able leader?

Multiple Actors in the Security Field
Assessing the skill with which Mielke ran his ministry is complicated by two factors. The first is that the Stasi quickly became a large organization and ended up a very large one; in 1989 it had a staff of 102,000. Its qualities derived from the skills of its staff at all levels. Even the minister was only one player on a big team. That said, he was never a nonentity; he could not be so since the ministry was run on the military model of a single commander: the minister dominated the ministry. He could give orders to any Stasi officer, regardless of rank, bypassing the ministry’s official hierarchy. Mielke exploited his position to the full, maintaining his connection with his senior officers via a battery of telephones in his office and demanding news from them every morning. Under his predecessor, Wollweber, the Kollegium, the Stasi’s highest body, had been an important forum for discussion and collective decision making;
though it still met under Mielke, he did not use it to take advice or make
decisions together with his officers. He was a bully who raged at his sub-
ordinates and badgered them with phone calls and demands. Egotism and
insecurity drove him to try and dominate others, and the Stasi’s authoritarian
structure and culture enabled him to do so. The minister was also the political
leadership’s chief intelligence adviser; the information it received on the GDR
and the outside world from the Stasi reached it by way of Mielke’s desk and
represented one of its principal sources of information.

The second factor is that security was such a crucial issue for the GDR
that several actors were involved in the making of security policy. The most
important were the Soviets. They dominated the ministry for most of the
1950s, and it operated under their direction to the very end. It was they who
built it up from scratch, teaching the staff how to do their jobs. Their influence
was everywhere. Mielke was one of their pupils; there is no evidence that he
had any involvement in intelligence work before 1945, and all he knew he
learned from Soviet instructors. It was they who gave the Stasi its character;
its operations were straightforward copies of their own. Even before Mielke
became its chief, it was a big organization with a large network of informers
that aimed at conducting comprehensive surveillance of society. Soviet over-
sight of the Stasi placed limits on Mielke’s authority to the very end. Since the
Stasi’s foreign intelligence service, the HVA, worked principally for the USSR
rather than the GDR and was ably led by a chief, Markus Wolf, who had strong
Soviet support, it enjoyed a measure of independence from Mielke. It was
Wolf, rather than Mielke, who was responsible for the service’s success. In its
early years it was run directly by the Soviets, who chose its staff.

The subordination of the Stasi to the Socialist Unity Party also placed lim-
its on Mielke’s authority: decisions on important matters of intelligence or
security had to be referred to the party’s first secretary (always jealous of his
authority, Mielke largely excluded his nominal superior, the Central Commit-
tee secretary in charge of security questions, from actual decision making).
The Politburo’s Security Commission (from 1960 called the National Defense
Council) also considered security matters. Within those limits, Mielke was a
very authoritative minister who had the last word on much that the Stasi did.

Personality

What were Mielke’s qualities? He had an enormous capacity for hard work. He
enjoyed robust good health, which he maintained carefully and which
enabled him to remain long in office. His self-discipline was considerable;
his work routine was punishing, and he was rarely seen drunk. He had intel-
lengence, but it was very ordinary. He left school at sixteen because he found the
work too difficult. Nevertheless, he had enough intelligence to do the job of
minister for state security. He had cunning and some talent for organization. His intellectual shortcomings did not stand in the way of the Stasi’s success: security work does not require high intelligence but rather diligence, thoroughness, and painstaking attention to detail. Mielke had all these qualities. He was greatly assisted by the GDR’s strict security regime and by the Stasi’s strong esprit de corps and sense of being an elite guard serving the party. He was a disciplinarian, obsessed with hierarchy, rank, and medals. The discipline he imposed on his staff was so strict that it was a form of bullying; his men were afraid of Mielke. They were disciplined for trivial matters, such as drinking too much and having affairs and car crashes. Any infringement of the ministry’s strict code of silence about its work led to disciplinary proceedings. Over time, the Stasi’s staff became very disciplined. Mielke played a role in this, but his enthusiasm for disciplinary action shows what a petty man he was. Moreover, much of the improvement in discipline that the Stasi actually needed had already been done before Mielke’s time as minister by his predecessor Ernst Wollweber.

Markus Wolf claims that Mielke had no capacity for long-term planning, for which he relied on others. The intellectual ordinariness of the Stasi’s staff was such that an able, refined man like Wolf appeared to those who dealt with him to be an outstanding figure. For the same reasons, the poetry-writing Yuri Andropov stood out among his colleagues in the KGB (Wolf also had literary leanings). For all his success as an intelligence chief, Wolf’s abilities were not outstanding ones. One reason Mielke enjoyed authority as minister was that he resembled his subordinates more than Wolf did. For all his ordinariness, Mielke left his mark on the Stasi and the history of the GDR—he was an ordinary man who mattered.

One of his key attributes was his unscrupulousness. Mielke was a criminal, as every Communist police chief had to be. For him, as for all Communist political police chiefs, guilt was political: an enemy was whoever stood in the party’s way. The party’s will was law. Nevertheless, he was a dedicated criminal. A passionately political man, he was a convinced Marxist-Leninist, and like all Marxist-Leninists, he believed that society was his enemy and had to be reformed by force. Any measure was justified, however criminal, if it served the cause of building a Communist society. His first notable political act was his participation in the murder of two Berlin policemen in August 1931. He was a political criminal for the rest of his long life (he died in May 2000 at the age of ninety-two).

Although Mielke certainly had qualities, they were not great enough to give him a large share of responsibility for the Stasi’s success. Little of that can be put down to him; he was an archetypal Soviet political policeman of the post-Stalin era. The most that can be said for him as minister is that from the early
1950s he played a significant role in turning a youthful and inexperienced staff into what was, ten years later, a successful security service. His other great achievement was to develop his career.

For all Mielke’s authoritarian style of leadership, the Stasi’s success resulted from the skill, commitment, and loyalty of its staff. It maintained its security very well: there were few Western agents in its ranks. This success secured its informer network in the West: the Stasi was able to build up and run an excellent human informer network in the Federal Republic, and West Germany’s intelligence agencies had no idea how deeply they had been penetrated. Mielke played little role in this. Between their creation in the early 1950s and dissolution in 1989–90, the Stasi and the VA/NVA (the intelligence service of the East German army) ran informer networks among West Germans totaling some twelve thousand people. Approximately half of these people reported to the HVA. A further six thousand reported to other departments of the Stasi and to the VA/NVA. The HVA in fact owed its success in collecting valuable intelligence not to the number of its spies but to its skillful, well-planned recruitment of agents and their adroit infiltration into suitable targets. If anything, as Mielke grew older, he hampered the success of the HVA since he became more cautious and fearful of diplomatic incidents. From 1974, when the West German chancellor, Willy Brandt, was brought down by the exposure of an HVA spy, Günter Guillaume, in the federal chancellery, Mielke and Honecker put pressure on the HVA to avoid any diplomatic incident, even if it had to dispense with a good source to do so. The HVA called this “Guillaume syndrome.”

Mielke played a bigger role in the expansion of the Stasi’s domestic network of informers, though the roles of the party’s two leaders—Walter Ulbricht (party first secretary from 1950 until 1971) and Erich Honecker (first secretary from 1971 until 1989)—were as important as his own. In the mid-1950s, before Mielke became minister, the Stasi’s domestic informer network already numbered between 20,000 and 30,000 people. It was substantially expanded in the 1960s, and in 1968 stood at 100,000 people. At its peak in the mid-1970s, it was made up of about 180,000 people, the great majority of them men. By 1989, when the regime fell, its size had fallen somewhat to 173,000 people, but it still represented a little more than 1 percent of the East German population. Depending on the district, the Stasi had an informer for between every 80 and 160 people.

The main reason for such an absurdly huge network was the acute insecurity of the GDR, which always lacked legitimacy and popular support and throughout its existence faced the subversive challenge of West Germany’s society, economy, and state. Three conservative Communists at the top of the GDR regime—Ulbricht, Honecker, and Mielke—furthermore decided a
huge network was necessary to improve the GDR’s security. Mielke’s narrow-minded, dogmatic Communism, combative character, and mistrustful personality inclined him toward intensifying surveillance and intimidation rather than countenancing reform. Since Communism could not be wrong, the Socialist Unity Party’s ruling group tended to blame all criticism and weakness on the hostile machinations of the class enemy rather than on the failings of Communism itself, thus making the class enemy a security problem. Mielke was one of the most aggressive exponents of this line of thinking; his profound mistrust of the East German population and aggressive determination to achieve as much control as possible over it supplied some further impetus for the recruitment of an immense informer network. He constantly hammered home to his officers the need for comprehensive social surveillance (in Stasi language this was called the “Who is who?”—Wer ist wer?—question). This reflected the mixture of aggression and insecurity characteristic of the dogmatic Communist.

Their reasoning went as follows: since Communism was correct, it was bound to triumph (they therefore overestimated its subversive appeal); since it was so subversive, the class enemy would have to make every possible effort to defeat it, which it had to be doing (even if evidence for this was lacking). Communist were, by their very nature, deluded. Whether the GDR ever was genuinely totalitarian—that is to say, sought and achieved total control of society—is a much-disputed question. However, one thing is certain: total control is what Mielke wanted. As Jens Gieseke has rightly observed, if the concept of totalitarianism did not already exist, anyone researching Mielke’s psychology would have had to invent it.

As soon as he became minister, Mielke sought consistently to increase his ministry’s size and responsibilities. He intensified domestic repression, pressing for the expansion of the Stasi’s informer network. These efforts reflected not only his dogmatic Marxism-Leninism and aggressive desire for as much control over East German society as possible, but also his determination to increase his power by making himself indispensable to his superiors. He was a power-seeking intriguer. From the late 1950s, on Ulbricht’s instructions, he expanded the Stasi and its informer network not only to clamp down hard on dissatisfaction and unrest but also to ensure that surveillance acted prophylactically, preventing Western “political-ideological diversion” from having any effect on East German society. His policy of “preventive” security, which utterly failed, represented an extreme view of what GDR security required. Until the mid-1960s the regime was too concerned with Ulbricht’s economic reform policy for Mielke to obtain the resources he needed. However, the ministry’s staff and informer network grew from then on. The Prague Spring, in 1968, gave the SED leaders a severe shock. From then on the conservatives in the Politburo were in the driving seat, and Mielke was given the resources he
needed to place society under ever wider surveillance and interfere even more in it. From the early 1970s, as détente proceeded, the prospect of closer relations with West Germany caused him and the new first secretary, Honecker, further alarm. Neither was willing to countenance any liberalization—least of all one forced by the West—of the Communist system.38

Mielke did not merely order measures against the regime’s opponents; he was personally involved in their persecution. In the 1950s, before he became minister, the divisions of the Stasi for which he was responsible were the main security departments and the trials department, Line IX, which prepared prosecutions of dissidents and spies for trial, chiefly by interrogation.39 Line IX was the core of the Stasi’s apparatus of political repression. Mielke often took part in interrogations and proved a pitiless and threatening interrogator. He spent many nights in the 1950s in the Stasi’s investigative prison in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen, interrogating prisoners. Throughout his time as minister he had a close relationship with Line IX. He displayed the same enthusiasm for disciplining his staff. Of course, once again he was merely taking to an extreme a responsibility imposed on him by the party. The Stasi’s immense emphasis on political education and disciplinary action was required by the party, which needed the Stasi to be an utterly reliable instrument of political repression. The party organization in the Stasi concerned itself not only with the political reliability of the ministry’s staff but also with their private lives; its supervision of them was another reason why the staff was so disciplined and little penetrated by the Western intelligence services.40

Mielke’s Marxism-Leninism affected the Stasi for the worse in its capacity of intelligence provider to the SED leadership. Of course, there were no independent press or media in the GDR, as a Communist state; the leadership’s only sources of information were official ones, which provided information colored by Marxism-Leninism and the party’s policies. The Stasi did little to correct this tendency. While the information it provided to the party leaders was among the best available to them, the ministry still did not make clear the extent of popular criticism. Mielke was responsible for this, though here again he acted as the leadership’s agent. Reporting on East German public opinion was the most sensitive type of reporting for the Stasi. Since the party claimed to represent the working class, which formed the overwhelming majority of East Germans, the Stasi could not present the population as dissatisfied with the regime. Presenting public opinion as it really was would have undermined the party’s claim that Marxism-Leninism rested on a scientific understanding of society, and thus weakened the legitimacy of its rule. The ministry would have risked being seen as an opposition within the party. It would thus have been in danger of infringing the ban, in force since Lenin’s time, on the formation of intra-party factions. In fact, the party leadership insisted on not
being told what the real situation in the GDR was; it wanted to be told that the construction of a Communist society was proving a success and that all problems came from the outside world. Mielke acquiesced in this because he was an orthodox Marxist-Leninist who believed this paranoid, self-satisfied conspiracy theory and because it was the only way to keep his job, which was his main aim.

He himself acted as the filter through which these reports passed—or did not pass—to the leadership. He frequently forbade that particular reports were sent to the party. From the time he became minister, the Stasi’s intelligence assessment staff (from 1965 called the Zentrale Auswertungs- und Informationsgruppe, ZAIG) reported on only those matters the party wanted it to report on. It reported to the party leadership on East German public opinion only a few times each year; its reports consistently played down the extent and severity of popular dissatisfaction over the GDR’s many failings. Criticism was always presented as coming from a minority, particularly of the working class. The ZAIG’s reporting assumed that the major threat to the GDR came from Western subversion. Most of the reports that went to the leadership (72%) between 1959 and 1989 were foreign intelligence reports, prepared by the HVA, on developments in the Western and developing worlds. Reports on events within the GDR tended to be about security matters—either attacks on the GDR’s security by enemy forces (usually in the West or under Western influence) or industrial accidents or economic mismanagement.41

Reporting on the state of the economy was another very sensitive matter. Once again, his handling of it demonstrates that Mielke cared more about his position than the GDR’s well-being. The SED Politburo always tended to make light of the GDR’s economic difficulties and take too optimistic a view of its economic performance. Save in the regime’s last days, Mielke did not challenge this in the Politburo, even though he knew full well by the early 1980s that the GDR had grave economic problems.42 In 1980 officers of the Stasi’s Line XVIII, responsible for the security of the East German economy, were told to prepare a report on the state of the economy. They were given access to the most sensitive economic records and reported that the economy was on the point of collapse. Mielke’s response was to threaten them with expulsion from the party if they did not moderate their conclusions. They duly did so.43

Some of the Stasi’s brutality is to be attributed to Mielke personally. In 1984, in front of his officers, he openly expressed frustration that he could not have some of East Germany’s dissidents shot.44 He was fully involved in Stasi efforts in the 1950s to kidnap defectors from its own ranks and those of the police and bring them back to the GDR for trial and punishment. The punishment was usually a long term of imprisonment; sometimes it was death. Among the Stasi’s victims was at least one of Mielke’s own enemies, Robert Bialek,
the former chief political officer of the embryonic East German army, the Barracked People’s Police (Kasernierte Volkspolizei), who fled to the West in 1953.\textsuperscript{45} He was not the only one behind this policy; Ernst Wollweber was equally merciless.\textsuperscript{46} Indeed, the Stasi’s entire culture, inherited from its Soviet parent, was one of violence in the service of the party. This is why Mielke felt so at home there. It has also been alleged that in 1950 he personally murdered another German Communist, Willi Kreikemeyer, who might have provided damning information about Mielke’s time in France, but there is no convincing evidence to support this claim.\textsuperscript{47} Into the 1980s traitors within the Stasi—people who spied for Western intelligence services or planned to flee to the West—were executed, even though the GDR had abolished capital punishment a decade before. The last such execution was that of Werner Teske, an HVA officer, in 1981.\textsuperscript{48} Mielke’s aim was to deter any defection from their ranks and thus to maintain the security of the ministry.

Mielke had no qualms about ordering his ministry to give training and other assistance to vicious Marxist-Leninist national liberation movements in the third world and to terrorist organizations such as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the African National Congress, and the Baader-Meinhof Gang. For a quarter of a century, starting in the early 1960s, the Stasi helped to build up the security services and police of brutally repressive regimes in the developing world. Its first foray into the third world was to Ghana, where Stasi officers helped to establish that state’s post-independence security agencies in the 1960s. In the 1970s the ministry gave security assistance both to Marxist regimes in Africa and the Middle East—those of Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and South Yemen—and to third world dictators who were seen as worthwhile friends (Idi Amin in Uganda and Francisco Macías Nguema in Equatorial Guinea). The Mozambican and South Yemeni regimes both put their enemies in concentration camps. There were large teams of Stasi advisers in Ethiopia and South Yemen. In the 1980s the Stasi gave security assistance to the Soviet-backed Communist regime in Afghanistan and the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua.

These partnerships with regimes in the developing world naturally led to support for terrorist organizations closely connected with them. Baader-Meinhof Gang terrorists found refuge in the GDR, with the regime’s knowledge and assistance, from 1977 on. The Stasi helped them to obtain training in terrorist techniques at PLO camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and South Yemen. It was complicit in crimes the Gang carried out. It also helped Libyan and Palestinian terrorists to murder American servicemen in the attack on the La Belle discotheque in West Berlin in 1986; the ministry knew in advance of the plan for the attack and helped the terrorists transport their explosives to West Berlin. While Mielke would certainly have secured Honecker’s approval
for this, the decision was also his and reflected his vicious combativeness. He regarded the Baader-Meinhof Gang as an instrument with which to destabilize his main enemy, West Germany. West German Communists were, from the mid-1970s, trained in insurgency techniques in the GDR, just in case the Federal Republic descended into civil strife. Another notorious terrorist, the Venezuelan Ilyich Ramírez Sánchez (known as “Carlos the Jackal”), also found sanctuary in the GDR.49

This viciousness harmed the GDR’s international standing throughout its short life and helped to bring about its end. George H. W. Bush, the former director of Central Intelligence who became president of the United States in 1989 and strongly supported West Germany’s drive for the unification of the two German states from the end of that year, has written in his memoir of that time of his hostility to the GDR and the reasons for it. Writing of a visit he made to West Germany in 1983 as vice president, he recalls:

I already felt an abhorrence for the German Democratic Republic before this trip. In my CIA days I had seen that East Germany was among the very worst offenders when it came to training terrorists or destabilizing countries. They were perhaps the most aggressive of all in the spying business and would stop at nothing to further their ends. It was the East Germans to whom the Soviets turned to carry out a lot of the ugliest missions. They were the chief bully of the East bloc.50

The judgment “the chief bully of the East bloc” applies well to Mielke personally. As his record shows, he was cruel and unscrupulous. There is no evidence of sadism, however; nor is there evidence from any time of his life that points to psychological imbalance. His mental faculties were in steep decline in his last years as minister, but he does not seem to have been fully senile. Despite his failing mental powers, he was still sufficiently composs mentis to realize, in 1989, that Gorbachev’s reform policy was encouraging popular opposition in the GDR that was capable of overthrowing the regime. When Leonid Shebarshin, the head of the KGB’s First Chief Directorate (PGU), its foreign intelligence service, visited the GDR in 1989, Mielke told him that Gorbachev’s reform policy threatened the very existence of the Communist regimes.51 He gave the same warning that summer to Sergei Kondrashev, one of Shebarshin’s senior officers who was vacationing in the GDR, and asked him to pass it on to KGB chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov for transmission to Gorbachev himself.52 Meeting his officers that summer, Mielke asked them whether there would be a popular uprising.

A careerist, Mielke lusted for office and power. He was still trying to stay in power in 1989, when he was eighty-one. Like the Soviet security chief
Lavrenti Beria before him, he showed cunning by ingratiating himself with his political superiors in the GDR’s ruling Socialist Unity Party and the Russians. His success in cultivating them—particularly the leading KGB officials—was the greatest success of his career. He consistently sought to make himself and his ministry appear indispensable in their eyes. He cultivated the SED first secretaries he served obsequiously. His state security ministry obtained Western luxury goods for the Socialist Unity Party leaders just as the KGB did for the Soviet Communist Party’s elite (its nomenklatura). It even stole such goods from packages sent by West Germans to their East German relatives and friends.

A cunning man, Mielke understood that every senior Communist official had to be a courtier. He displayed political gifts. He always took care to present himself as loyal to the Socialist Unity Party’s first secretary. He was always asking senior officials who dealt frequently with the first secretary for the latest news about him. In fact, he betrayed both of the first secretaries he served. He supported Erich Honecker’s attempt to overthrow Walter Ulbricht and later supported Egon Krenz’s move to overthrow Honecker. He also abandoned his chief, Wilhelm Zaisser, in 1953, when circumstances and Walter Ulbricht turned against the then minister for state security. Seeing that his moment had come, he actively cooperated with Ulbricht when the latter tried in 1957 to drive Wollweber out of the position of minister. So self-important was Mielke that it took him a long time to accept Honecker as his leader—when he had to toast the first secretary, he did so leaving Honecker’s name out or mispronouncing it. Instead, he regarded the KGB chairman, Yuri Andropov, as his chief.

His position as minister for state security gave him very good knowledge of the party nomenklatura, which he exploited skillfully. He carefully collected damaging information on his party rivals so as to get the better of them in the struggle for power, but he never challenged the political elite. Mielke was careful in how he presented himself to others. Wolf relates that in their discussions, Mielke always portrayed himself as a true friend of the Soviet Union. When Gorbachev introduced his reform policy in the Soviet Union, Mielke trod a careful path, publicly proclaiming his loyalty to the Soviet leader and his policies while not distancing himself from his own party leadership’s very obvious dislike of them. Although Mielke displayed skill, it was no more than an application of the time-honored maxim “Sniff out, suck up, survive.” The Russians rightly read him as an insincere careerist.

The Functionary
Mielke was, above all, a functionary: a man who implemented the will of others. He was the instrument by which Walter Ulbricht and the KGB imposed
their will on the Stasi. It is telling that when he finally achieved the position he craved, that of full member of the Politburo, he said little in Politburo meetings. He claimed that this was for security reasons; in reality, he could contribute little to the Politburo’s decision making. He became the third most important man in the GDR not because he was able but because his job was so important.

His superiors used Mielke above all to ensure that they were served by a loyal and capable political police. From the earliest days of his time in the police he had responsibility for selecting suitable police officials, weed out unsuitable ones, and training the police in the Marxist-Leninist worldview.

Obsequious toward his superiors, Mielke bullied his subordinates mercilessly. He was an authoritarian minister whose outbursts of temper grew worse as he got older. His self-importance was vast. His treatment of his subordinates was also condescending: he called them by their surnames and used the familiar form (“Du”) to address them, whereas most of them had to call him “comrade minister” and use the polite form (“Sie”) when speaking to him. His birthday parties were spectacular demonstrations of self-importance. They took place at a country estate outside Berlin that served as Mielke’s hunting lodge. The guests were serenaded at dinner by a choir of the Stasi’s armed force, the “Wachregiment Feliks Dzerzhinsky.”

Mielke owed his authority to his position, not his abilities. He does not impress as a leader of men (he led very few women since there were few in his ministry). That said, his unquestioned authority as minister from 1957 to 1989 had a beneficial impact on the Stasi, which was not as racked by internal politics and infighting as the KGB. Mielke’s ministry had an authoritative head—albeit a mediocre, old, and increasingly senile one. He was loyal to the first secretary (at least most of the time), and the first secretary in turn supported him, as did the KGB.

The GDR relied heavily on Mielke. Such a fragile state could only survive thanks to a powerful, ruthless political police; the Stasi was therefore created in 1949–50, as the GDR itself was being founded. Since the Stalinists who led the SED were convinced of the correctness of Marxism-Leninism, any criticism of the regime or Communist society among East Germans was regarded as the subversive work of the class enemy rather than a natural development. Suppressing it therefore became a task for the Stasi, whose minister steadily rose in importance and influence until by the mid-1980s he was the third most powerful man in the state after the party leader Erich Honecker and the overseer of the economy Günter Mittag. Together with the KGB, the SED, and his own officers, Mielke did play a role in making the Stasi the effective security service it was. It always bore his brutal stamp. However, rather than he being the making of it, it was the making of him.
Conclusion

Throughout all his years in the Stasi, Mielke followed a few simple rules: satisfy both the Russians and the party; ingratiate yourself with the party leader for as long as he is in firm control of the party; keep a close eye out for dissent by assembling the best force of informers you can; and maintain the ministry’s security—by political education, disciplinary measures, and if necessary, kidnapping and murder. He had the ambition, diligence, combativeness, cunning, and good health to follow these rules successfully, which kept him in office for thirty-two years.

His greatest success was to win the KGB’s backing. The Russians became strong supporters of his because he was an exponent of the conservative Communism in which they believed. He was just as committed as they were to fighting the “class enemy,” both in the GDR and beyond its borders, and created a security regime to do this that resembled theirs. By the 1960s they were impressed with the degree of security that the Stasi had achieved in the GDR. He imposed an extremely strict security regime with the brutal aggression that so characterized him. Ehrhart Neubert’s judgment on him is a good one: “Mielke personified the criminal energy of the Stalinist communists from the 1930s until the end of the GDR.”

Notes

2. David Murphy, Sergei Kondrashev, and George Bailey, Battleground Berlin: CIA vs. KGB in the Cold War (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 293.
6. Reinhold Andert and Wolfgang Herzberg, Der Sturz: Erich Honecker im Kreuzzehör [The fall: Erich Honecker cross-examined] (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1990), 376.
7. Von Flocken and Scholz, Ernst Wollweber, 151, 175, 185.


33. Großmann, *Bonn im Blick*, 120.

34. The Socialist Unity Party’s leader was known as the general secretary from 1950 to 1953 and from 1976 to 1989. From 1953 to 1976 he was known as the first secretary.


45. See Michael Herms and Gert Noack, *Aufstieg und Fall des Robert Bialek* [Rise and fall of Robert Bialek] (Berlin: edition ost, 1998). Bialek was kidnapped by the Stasi in West Berlin in February 1956 and taken to East Berlin, where he is believed to have died in captivity.


47. See Wolfgang Kießling, “Leistner ist Mielke.” *Schatten einer gefälschten“


52. Murphy, Kondrashev, and Bailey, *Battleground Berlin*, 397.


57. Ibid., 77.

58. Ibid., 35.


