II. Accounts of Recent Conferences Sponsored or Co-Sponsored by the Institute

The East German State Security: Its History and Its Sources.

German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., November, 2, 1993.
Convener: Peter Becker.

The aim of this workshop was to explore new approaches to the study of the former East German State Security (Stasi). Herbert Reinke, a member of the research team charged with providing a scholarly analysis of the millions of documents generated by the Stasi, was the main speaker. Alf Lüdtke, a research associate at the Max-Planck-Institut fur Geschichte in Göttingen, who used files in the collection while completing research on the East German Volkspolizei, commented on Reinke's paper.

Reinke began the program with a short introduction to the history of the Stasi, which, at the end of its existence (after the fall of the Berlin Wall), was a huge government bureaucracy with 97,000 full-time employees and about 107,000 unofficial informers. The Stasi files became available to the public immediately, and, by mid-1993, Reinke's office had received some 1.8 million applications requesting to inspect the files. Applicants were either individuals interested in their own files or representatives of local, state, and federal administrations looking into the background of their employees, since cooperation with the Stasi as an unofficial informer is reason for dismissal from public service.

Reinke discussed two collections of files, the IM-Akten, consisting of files on each individual informer, and the ZAIG-Akten, the reports of the evaluators who summarized the social and political situation for the top echelons of the Communist party (SED) and the state ministries. First Reinke talked about the informers, who detailed every aspect of daily life in the GDR, often producing voluminous reports of two hundred pages or more. They documented the life of their neighbors, spied on leisure activities, and related problems they encountered at the workplace. Sometimes their reports focused on special events or particular issues, such as youth culture. The sheer amount of information contained in the reports posed severe problems for the informers' supervisors, who had to cross-check every piece of data with other sources.
Reinke then talked about the ZAIG-Akten and the way in which the reports were transmitted to the authorities. He pointed out that Stasi officials tried to produce a homogeneous, monotonous image of the situation in the country by cutting out mention of overly positive and negative aspects of East German society.

Both the open discussion and the commentary by Alf Lüdtke focused on the role of the informers, especially their motivation to collaborate with the Stasi and to reveal sometimes intimate details about their close friends and relatives. Reinke argued that the Stasi used a highly selective strategy for the recruitment of informers, and that most of them cooperated voluntarily. However, many unofficial informers, whom the Stasi used to prove the authenticity of informers’ reports, claim that they were forced to work for the Stasi. Both Reinke and Lüdtke questioned their perspective, which portrays the state as a totalitarian authority that subjects its people to harsh and inhumane rule.

Reinke and Lüdtke tried to account for the involvement of such a great number of citizens by using more theoretical models. The first model explained the cooperation within the framework of communication theory, which assumes that informers cooperated with the Stasi in the hope that their observations and opinions would influence the officials and thereby stimulate social change. A second model pointed to the psychological dynamics that were at play in the confidential meetings between the informer and his or her supervisor.

Peter Becker

Medicine in 19th- and 20th-Century Germany: Ethics, Politics, and Law


At the turn of the century, German medicine reached the peak of its scientific achievements and international prestige. Less than five decades later, the medical profession was caught up in its greatest moral crisis, and the process of coming to terms with this crisis has been painful and incomplete until, today. The conference aimed to put the central questions of ethics, politics, and law into a broad chronological framework by analyzing important developments in German medicine from its beginnings in the early nineteenth century to the present. Although