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## Surviving the Stasi: Jehovah's Witnesses in Communist East Germany, 1965 to 1989\*

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### Introduction

Except for the short and precarious period of tolerance immediately after the end of the Second World War when they were officially recognised as 'victims of fascism', Jehovah's Witnesses suffered severe persecution throughout the history of the German Democratic Republic. The ruling party, the SED, and its instruments of repression were determined to destroy the organisation and faith of the approximately 20,000 brethren who lived in the country. The modalities of repression changed over time, ranging from brutal repression in the early 1950s to the more subtle, albeit nefarious, policy of subversion from the later 1960s onwards. The shift was determined by domestic and international circumstances as well as by the realisation that a quick knockout had not been achieved by the ban on the organisation in 1950 and the subsequent show trials. Consequently, the authorities' goal was amended to the gradual dissolution of the Witness organisation and its *Gleichschaltung* or incorporation as a subservient religious group into the SED-dominated political and social system. Why the SED and the Ministry of State Security (MfS) were so determined on the destruction of the Witness organisation, how they sought to realise this goal in the final two decades of the GDR and why the Jehovah's Witnesses survived the Stasi are the major issues examined in this article.

### The Ministry of State Security and its Perception of the Witness 'Threat'

Although a myriad of agencies was deployed against the Witnesses, among them the Ministry of Justice and the German People's Police, the main agent of control, surveillance and persecution was the Ministry of State Security, popularly known as the Stasi. Founded in 1950, its mission was to serve as the shield and sword of the SED and to protect the socialist system and the East German state from internal and external threats, especially by uncovering and forestalling 'the hostile plans of the

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aggressive imperialists and their helpers'. External and internal threats were not regarded as separate entities. In the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, an interlocking was supposed to exist in the form of close organisational links between the congregations in the GDR on the one hand and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society's Brooklyn headquarters and its West German branch office in Wiesbaden on the other. The latter's special Eastern Bureau, which was located in West Berlin until 1961, directed the affairs of the Jehovah's Witness organisation in the GDR, appointed the leading servants and was responsible for the courier system and the smuggling of Witness literature into East Germany (Hirsch, 2003b, pp. 112, 120–22, 139).

In a state situated on the highly vulnerable and dangerous border between capitalism and imperialism and with a more fragile legitimacy than its economically stronger West German sibling, security was a recurring nightmare for the East German elites. The autocratic arch-Stalinist, Erich Mielke, who served as minister of State Security between 1957 and 1989, sought to resolve the problem by creating an Orwellian system which, as he told his officers in 1968, would enable them 'to control every pulse beat, every stirring and every movement which does not contribute to the strengthening and consolidation of our socialist republic' (Cited in Vollnhals, 2002, p. 113; my translation). In accordance with this aspiration and fuelled by his ambition to expand his security empire, the ministry's full-time staff escalated from 32,912 to 81,495 between 1967 and 1982. Seven years later, numbers peaked at 91,015 (Dennis, 2003, p. 78). But this was by no means the whole story, for the officers were assisted by a phalanx of spies or unofficial co-workers (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* – IMs) whose number rose from 20,000 to 30,000 in the mid-1950s to about 100,000 in 1968. After surging to about 180,000 in 1975, numbers fell slightly to 173,000 in 1988–89 (Gieseke, 2001, pp. 112–13). At the time of the collapse of SED rule, in 1989, about one in 50 East German adults worked for the Stasi either as an informer or as an officer.

Located in East Berlin, Main Department XX, a pivotal body in Mielke's sprawling empire, was primarily concerned with combating what the Stasi dubbed the political underground and political-ideological diversion and with 'securing' areas such as education, sport, the armed forces and the mass organisations. Further down the line, it had a Department in each of the 15 Administrative Regions (*Bezirke*) of the GDR and worked closely with the Stasi District Service Units (*Kreisdienststellen*), as well as with other central organs, such as Departments 26 and M, which were engaged in postal and telephone monitoring respectively. Within Main Department XX, a relatively small special section – Main Department XX/4 – had overall responsibility for monitoring and controlling the Catholic and Protestant Churches as well as religious groups such as the Jewish Communities, the New Apostolic Church and the Jehovah's Witnesses. The section was not autonomous as it had to coordinate its work with the politically important Working Party for Church Questions of the SED Central Committee and the State Secretariat for Church Questions. Within Main Department XX/4, a further sub-unit, desk III, headed by Lieutenant Major Herbrich, concentrated on the religious communities and the so-called 'sects' (see Vollnhals, 1996a, pp. 79–97).

### **Stasi Perception of the Witness 'Threat'**

Given the Stasi's plethora of tasks, why did an overburdened apparatus invest so many resources in the repression of a relatively small number of Jehovah's Witnesses? After all, had not Witnesses, like so many communists, suffered imprisonment and

death in the camps of the Third Reich? And did not the Stasi's informers and officers frequently acknowledge that Witnesses were noted for their industriousness, modesty and politeness?

An answer should first be sought in the intrinsic and seemingly irreconcilable antagonism between the doctrines and practices of the Jehovah's Witnesses and those of dictatorial systems, whether of a fascist or a communist persuasion. While Witnesses also come into conflict with governments of pluralist polities, the level of tolerance is far higher there than in a dictatorship like that of the SED with its claims to an exclusive political religion and with an abhorrence of autonomous sub-systems. In an atmosphere of mutual fear and suspicion, especially in the early years of the Cold War when the SED was constructing a system which demanded adherence to Marxist-Leninist doctrine, loyalty to the state and full engagement in societal activities, the Witnesses' conscientious objection to military service and their notion of political neutrality prompted the SED to regard the brethren as political and social 'outsiders' and as agents of the implacable imperialist foe.

A major political and ideological fault running between the Jehovah's Witnesses and the communists concerned the question of competing loyalties to God and the state. While the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society insists that Jehovah's Witnesses obey the laws of the country in which they live, these laws must not conflict with those of God, to whom they owe their primary loyalty. They therefore see themselves as soldiers in God's army, not of the secular state, which, whether democratic or authoritarian, is, like the oppressive commercial system, part of the world of Satan the Devil. This 'old world' is destined to end in the final showdown between the forces of good and evil, or what is referred to in the Bible as the Battle of Armageddon. While predictions of the date of this battle and when the Kingdom of God will ultimately rule over the Earth have led the Society into great semantic and eschatological confusion, East German Witnesses regarded this issue as of secondary importance compared to the reassuring message that the heavenly Kingdom of God will ultimately arrive and that those willing to obey God's laws will have the opportunity to live forever in a paradise Earth. Although the SED, too, propagated its own vision of a better society in which, under its guidance and steering, social ownership of the means of production would remove exploitation and social inequality, its notion of a workers' and peasants' state with its highly centralised economic and political structures was incompatible with the theocratic construct of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.

Witness evangelism, including the key element of house-to-house calls, was another source of conflict with the regime. It is incumbent on Jehovah's Witnesses that, like Christ, they do not isolate themselves from society but preach the Kingdom good news and make disciples, a vital task which helps determine who will be saved and who will be damned eternally. But it is also a task which often requires brethren to make great personal sacrifices and to suffer severe persecution. An elaborate organisational structure, which underwent many changes under the leadership of the second president, Rutherford (1869–1942), and his successor, Knorr (1905–77), underpins the proselytising mission and was continuously targeted by the Stasi and the police. Local congregations, comprising ordinary members and officials, and above all the elders, formed the base of a pyramid which led up via the circuits, districts and branches to the central Governing Body of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society in Brooklyn. The original national administrative branch of the Society in Germany was based in Magdeburg, a city which found itself situated in the GDR after the division of Germany in 1949.

Whereas several religious communities, such as the Jewish Communities, the Mormons and the New Apostolic Church, managed to survive the ruthless persecution of the 1950s and came to enjoy legal recognition and a restricted space for practising their faith, the Jehovah's Witnesses were subjected to the ban on their organisation in 1950, the closing down of the branch office in Magdeburg, and a series of show trials and the imprisonment of leading servants in 1950–51. A second wave of arrests occurred in 1965, followed one year later by the imposition of lengthy prison sentences. The official 'case' for the banning of the Witness organisation had been put forward in August 1950 by Steinhoff, the GDR Minister of the Interior, who argued that the Witnesses

have pursued systematic agitation against the existing democratic order and its laws under the cloak of religious meetings. Further, they have continually imported and distributed illegal publications, whose contents violate the Constitution of the German Democratic Republic as well as efforts to maintain peace. At the same time, it has been established that 'Jehovah's Witnesses' have served as spies for an imperialistic power. (Cited in Dirksen, 2001b, p. 216)

The authorities knew that the latter allegation was without foundation, as is now apparent from declassified police and Stasi files: in August 1950 the Criminal Police openly admitted in a top-secret memorandum that no evidence existed of espionage by Jehovah's Witnesses (Hacke, 2003, p. 319, f. 48) and the Stasi reported six years later that no brethren had been convicted of espionage since the introduction of the ban (Hirsch, 2003a, p. 117).

Although the accusations levelled against the Witnesses by Steinhoff and the charge of warmongering in the show trials were palpably untrue, a mountain of confidential reports and other top-level materials compiled by MfS officers point to the conclusion that the authorities' actions were neither a matter of political convenience nor a temporary phenomenon but the expression of a deep-rooted hostility. Among these materials, which are held in the Central and Regional Archives of the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic (BStU), are 11 dissertations and one lengthy in-house thesis (*Hausarbeit*) which, written between 1975 and 1985, were concerned solely with Jehovah's Witnesses in the GDR.<sup>1</sup> The writing of a dissertation formed an important element of the officers' training on full- and part-time courses run by the Stasi's College of Legal Studies (*Juristische Hochschule*) whose aim was to enhance the professionalism of staff and further their practical skills in security and intelligence work.

As the dissertations were intended for internal consumption only and were composed by officers in the field, they represent an invaluable insight into the ministry's perception of the Jehovah's Witnesses and its officers' *modus operandi* at a time when the focus had shifted from open coercion to operational subversion. The image of the 'Witness enemy' portrayed in the dissertations is consistent with past pronouncements by the Stasi, in particular the notion that the Watchtower Society, with its headquarters in Brooklyn, was a tool of the reactionary wing of American business, government and intelligence services and that it formed an integral element in the psychological warfare being waged by imperialists in the international class struggle against socialism. What this entailed, according to Lieutenant Bartnik of Department XX of the Suhl Regional Administration, was the diffusion

of anticommunist, nationalist, racist and clerical ideas (Bartnik, 1977, p. 4). Virulent anticommunism against the Soviet Union in particular, but also against the GDR, was regarded by the Stasi as a fundamental component of the Watchtower Society's political-ideological diversion (see, for example, Wenzlawski and Kleinow, 1975, pp. 6–10); among the main means of transmission were 'ostensibly' religious magazines such as *Awake!* and *The Watchtower* (Riedel, 1980, pp. 5–6, 8). While the anticommunist stance of the Witnesses is hardly surprising in view of their persecution in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the officers' charge that they were the lackeys of imperialism conveniently overlooked the discrimination suffered by Jehovah's Witnesses in countries such as the USA and Canada and it failed to take account of the Watchtower Society's criticism of the capitalist system. Similarly, the designation of the Witness community as a political-underground organisation ignored the palpable fact that it was the 1950 ban which had driven it underground in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

A comparison of statements in authoritative documents issued by the Stasi's regional and central organs with those in staff dissertations shows that the officers' views were firmly embedded in ministry thinking. An information bulletin which was circulated to police officers in 1984 catalogued the Jehovah's Witnesses' alleged 'societal-hostile' characteristics: obstructing the development of socialist consciousness; refusing to perform military service; declining to take part in elections and other forms of 'democratic' decision-making; fostering superstition and hostility towards science; discouraging young Witnesses from entering post-compulsory education; putting children's lives at risk by denying them the opportunity for blood transfusion; and associating socialism with the kind of fear and uncertainty endemic in bourgeois-capitalist society (Kurzauskunft, 1984, p. 71). Major Engelhardt of the Karl-Marx-Stadt Regional Administration expounded on this last point in a circular to District Service Units. According to Engelhardt, Jehovah's Witnesses instrumentalised their end-of-the-world 'propaganda' to denigrate socialism by linking it to the contradictions and crises which were intrinsic to capitalism, such as wars, hunger and unemployment. In his view, this deliberately ignored socialism's many social achievements, for example, job security and a comprehensive vocational training programme for young people (Verbotene, 1977, pp. 282, 285, 288–89, 292). The threat to peace supposedly posed by Jehovah's Witnesses led the Stasi into the realms of political fantasy. Realising that in the age of détente Witnesses could not be accused of direct warmongering, as was purportedly the case in the early part of the Cold War, a report issued by the Stasi Greifswald District Service Unit in 1983 accused the Society of welcoming a future world-wide atomic war as a desirable and practical preliminary stage to Armageddon (Sachstandbericht, 1983, p. 156).

Such unfounded and exaggerated accusations against the Jehovah's Witnesses were not confined to confidential internal reports and dissertations but were propagated in a book which was incorporated into the Stasi's overall strategy to disrupt and undermine the Witness organisation. First published in the GDR in 1970 under the title *Die Zeugen Jehovas: eine Dokumentation über die Wachtturmgesellschaft* (*Jehovah's Witnesses: A Documentary Study of the Watchtower Society*), it appeared in West Germany in the following year. Although Manfred Gebhard was named as the editor, the actual author was a former Witness, Dieter Pape, who had been recruited as a Stasi agent while serving a prison sentence. Recent research has shown not only that he cooperated actively with the Stasi but also that the real driving force behind the production of the book was Main Department XX/4, and in particular Oskar Herbrich (Dirksen, 2001a, p. 34; Hirsch, 2000, pp. 55–58, 65). The book was used as a manual for training Stasi officers in the arts of subversion against the

Witnesses (Hirsch, 2003a, pp. 305–12; Besier, 2003, p. 141–44) and as a lever for discrediting the Society as an agent of American business and government. Typical of the book's smear tactics were the fabrication that the Witnesses had actively sought to engineer the collapse of the GDR during the June 1953 Uprising (Gebhard, 1971, pp. 275–77), the accusation of collaboration between Witness leaders and the Gestapo (Gebhard, 1971, pp. 153, 158–70) and its total silence on the victimisation and sufferings of Witnesses during the Third Reich.

Officers' dissertations, departmental reviews and reports on elaborate operations against the Witness organisation all attest to the Stasi's enduring hostility to the Watchtower Society and to the devotion of considerable resources to the persecution of what was a relatively small minority. As discussed earlier, the basic reason for the antagonism is located in the authorities' abhorrence of organisational and ideological autonomy not only in the public arena but also in the private spheres of family, religion and civil associations. Even when the SED and the security forces came to realise that not all sections of society could be cast in the Marxist-Leninist mould, as was increasingly the case from the 1960s onwards, the trappings of outward loyalty were demanded by the SED and other ruling parties in post-Stalinist Eastern Europe. The Czech dissident and later president, Václav Havel, illustrated this point well in a vignette about a greengrocer who, though indifferent to the ideological content of slogans which the party required him to hang up in his shop, followed instructions for fear of losing his job and creating problems for his family. In so doing, according to Havel, the greengrocer accepted the rules which made possible the continuation of the political game of post-totalitarianism (Havel, 1989, pp. 45–46). Havel might have mentioned, but did not do so, that Jehovah's Witnesses were among those few groups which were not prepared to subject themselves to 'living a lie'. Their resistance in the GDR is recalled by a sister when she was interviewed in 1999 (see Schmidt, 2003b, p. 249). Unlike the community policeman who lived on the floor below, she and her husband refused to put flags out as part of the customary May Day celebrations and objected to the unwanted appearance on their fence of photos and other indicators of loyalty to the SED.

The antagonism which pervaded officers' perception of the Jehovah's Witnesses was in part the result of an intensive indoctrination in the tenets of Marxism-Leninism which helped turn the ministry into a loyal and ideologically conservative bulwark of the regime. At the same time, the demonisation of the Watchtower Society and the brethren served as a justification for officers' lack of moral scruples and the 'dirty tricks' campaigns. Why such campaigns were deemed necessary must also be sought in the tenets of the Stasi's security doctrine, which was premised on an all-embracing and interlocking internal and external threat and conspiracy, a perception which the Berlin Wall and the international recognition of the early 1970s failed to remove. Ironically, détente exacerbated the SED and Stasi elites' fears of the subversion of the GDR by negative and hostile forces as the improvement in East-West relations led to a dramatic increase in private contacts between East and West Germans. Mielke's presentation to a service conference in 1972 exemplifies official thinking:

I would like to stress that, concerning the strategy and the tactics of the imperialists, we cannot allow ourselves any illusions. Every day in our work we receive confirmation of the correctness of Comrade Erich Honecker's assessment... that imperialism is and will remain aggressive, deceitful and dangerous, and that we have no reason to let up on our political and military vigilance. (Cited in Gieseke, 2002, p. 50)

This statement is symptomatic of what the American historian Richard Hofstadter has described as the paranoid style in which the enemy is a projection of the self, both the ideal and unacceptable aspects (Hofstadter, 1966, pp. 3–4, 6, 32). Among the Witnesses' 'ideal' characteristics which frequently attracted officers' grudging admiration was the Society's mobilisation and control of the brethren by what Majors Wenzlawski and Kleinow referred to as the highly centralised, authoritarian and tightly organised structure from the leadership down to the lowest level, a structure which served to ensure unconditional obedience to the Governing Body and Society doctrines (Wenzlawski and Kleinow, 1975, pp. 6–10). This hierarchical organisation, together with the Witnesses' clandestine practices, had another double-edged merit in that, according to Second Lieutenant Prescher, it impeded the Stasi's penetration of the Society's security screen (Prescher, 1980, pp. 5, 7).

### **The Persecution of the Witnesses from 1965 to 1989: Operational Decomposition**

The Stasi persecution of the Witnesses from the early 1960s was centred around the Central Operation Campaign, ZOV 'Swamp' (*Zentraler Operativer Vorgang 'Sumpf'*). Six regional sub-operations (*Teilvorgänge*) and Operation Campaign 'Tower' (*Operativer Vorgang 'Thurm'*) were integrated into the ZOV.<sup>3</sup> When ZOV 'Swamp' was launched in 1963, its central goal was the destruction of the leadership groups, which had been reconstituted after the building of the Berlin Wall. The new organisational framework consisted of the three-brothers committee, or executive body, headed by Werner Liebig, five *Bezirke* or Regions, each under a servant, and a further subdivision into 17 *Kreise* or *Gegenden* guided by *Kreisdiener*. The latter maintained contact with the rungs immediately below them, that is, the *Gebiete*, congregations (also known as *Ortsgemeinde*) and the bible study groups, each with their own *Studienleiter*. About four to six people attended home bible studies. For reasons of security, the executive, which was given the cover name 'Emmeberg', was expected to meet only with the *Bezirksdiener*, and the latter with *Kreisdiener* (Hirsch, 2003b, pp. 140–41; Dirksen, 2001a, pp. 678–82). Central Operation Campaign 'Swamp', whose aims also included the severing of Witness links with the West, culminated in the arrest of 17 leaders in November 1965 and the imposition of heavy prison sentences of 5–12 years in the following year (Dirksen, 2001a, pp. 682–713). Main Department XX/4 hailed these measures as 'a great success' for, in its opinion, not only had the central and local leadership structures been liquidated but the remaining groups had been forced to concentrate on religious matters only (Arbeitsdirektive, 1966, pp. 27–29). This view was not, however, shared by Department XX of the Karl-Marx-Stadt Regional Administration since it was aware that the arrest of two leading Jehovah's Witnesses, Rink and Dietzsch, had failed to curb the 'illegal activity of the organisation' in its region (Einschätzung, 1966, p. 135).

When ZOV 'Swamp' was revised in March 1966, the new work directive followed the Karl-Marx-Stadt line of thought. The directive's acknowledgment that the ministry was caught up in a protracted struggle against the Society (Arbeitsdirektive, 1966, p. 34) was soon borne out by an increase in the number of brethren (Hirsch, 2003b, p. 150) and the thorough overhaul of the Witness organisation between 1965 and 1969. The latter was accomplished with the assistance of the Wiesbaden branch office and through the efforts in the GDR of Helmut Martin and newly appointed *Bezirksdiener* such as Wolfgang Meise and Rolf Hintermeyer (Dirksen, 2001a, p. 716). Among the other countermeasures of the Society was the issuing in 1967 of a document entitled *Hirten schützt Jehovas Herde* (*Shepherds, protect Jehovah's Flock*).

Despatched to all *Bezirks-* and *Kreisdiener*, it provided detailed and practical advice on how to deal with the Stasi's machinations. Congregation members were to avoid visits to leading servants in their apartments; a concerted effort was to be made to prevent the Stasi from bugging conversations in cars and houses; brethren were advised not to use family names; and elders were to be identified by a number, not their name (Operativ-Information, 1969, pp. 5–7; Hirsch, 2003b, pp. 154–55; Schmidt, 2003b, pp. 266–68).

The outcome of the Stasi's reappraisal of its aims and tactics can be followed in the ZOV 'Swamp' work directive. The key aims can be summarised as follows: preventing a revival of the Witness organisation; cutting off its contacts with the branch office in Wiesbaden; suppressing the courier system; and liquidating the 'hostile' activities of the remaining officials. To achieve these aims, greater support was to be given to the Witness 'opposition movement' which the Stasi had formed around the *Christliche Verantwortung* (Christian Responsibility) association. In addition, more IMs were to be recruited from among leading Witnesses and an improvement was planned in the coordination of campaigns. The Regional Administrations and the subordinate District Service Units were allotted responsibility for carrying out sub-operations (*Teilvorgänge*) and OVs. Main Department XX/4 remained in overall charge of the ZOV and of monitoring its progress by means of biannual assessments (Arbeitsdirektive, 1966, pp. 31–33).

1966 marked the transition to a new stage in the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses: in future, priority was given to the gradual and systematic subversion or 'decomposition' of the Witness organisation rather than to the swift liquidation of the leadership. Not only had the removal of existing leaders proved equivalent to cutting off the head of the Hydra but overt persecution had also created a feeling of martyrdom, tightened bonds between ordinary believers and leading servants and reinforced rather than weakened the faith of brethren (Bergner, 1976, p. 26; Kownatzki, 1979, p. 11). External opinion was another crucial factor in the deployment of 'softer' forms of control as open terroristic methods damaged the reputation of the GDR when it was pursuing international recognition by the West in the late 1960s. Even when the latter was achieved a few years later, the SED still needed to pay attention to the country's image, both at home and abroad, especially in light of the fierce inter-German rivalry and the continuing pursuit of regime legitimacy. It should be stressed, however, that while 'hard' measures against the Witnesses declined in frequency, coercion and injustice such as arbitrary imprisonment remained endemic (see the contributions by Wrobel and Dirksen in this issue of *RSS*).

A series of operational decomposition measures had already been implemented against the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example in 1956–57, when the SED had staged a carefully-manipulated bout of destalinisation. The rationale for decomposition was put forward in a Stasi report to the SED Central Committee in 1956: arrests should be kept to a minimum as they had failed to achieve a significant weakening of the Witness organisation and to elicit a favourable reaction among the GDR population, who regarded Jehovah's Witnesses as 'honourable, simple' people (Schmidt, 2003b, pp. 88–89; Hirsch, 2003a, p. 122). The Stasi's fondness for decomposition measures notwithstanding, not until the later 1960s to early 1970s, above all after Erich Honecker succeeded Walter Ulbricht as SED leader in 1971, were they turned into major components of the ministry's strategic offensive against 'enemy' forces. 'Decomposition' is a translation of the German word '*Zersetzung*'. While another alternative is 'destruction', decomposition captures the essence of persecution by

stealth or what Hubertus Knabe has dubbed a system of 'silent repression' (Knabe, 2000, p. 92). This kind of system was designed to subvert, erode and ultimately liquidate the many real or alleged 'hostile' and 'negative' forces, whether Jehovah's Witnesses or Protestants, human rights groups or nonconformist skinheads and punks. The Stasi's in-house dictionary of key terms defined the goal of operational decomposition as: 'splitting up, disorganising and isolating hostile-negative forces in order, through preventive action, to foil, considerably reduce or stop completely hostile-negative actions and their consequences, or, in a varying degree, to win them back both politically and ideologically' (Suckut, 1996, p. 422 (my translation)). The covert measures which the Stasi deployed, an array of 'dirty tricks', were detailed in the 1976 ministerial guidelines on the running of operational campaigns: the systematic compromising and isolation of a 'target' by means of rumour, disinformation concerning alleged immorality and spying for the West; creating fear and uncertainty through sending anonymous letters and burglary; and provoking disagreements among 'opposition' groups (Gill and Schröter, 1991, pp. 390–91). Examples are given below of how Jehovah's Witnesses were affected by this insidious form of repression.

### **The Apparatus of Repression**

Stasi officers were expected to integrate the various operational decomposition measures into concerted campaigns against 'targets'. There were three main types of case: an operational personal check (OPK – *Operative Personenkontrolle*), an integrated operational clandestine campaign (OV – *Operativer Vorgang*) and a central operational campaign (ZOV). The campaigns were seen by officers as advantageous not only for the regime but even for those pursued by the Stasi. Despite all that is now known about the damage done to the health, reputation and the personal relations of the victims, two ex-officers made the preposterous claim, in 2002, that the sole goal of operational decomposition was for the benefit of the targets. The measures were, so the argument runs, intended to deter individuals from committing a crime and engaging in subversive activities (Grimmer and Irmeler, 2002, p. 303). The 'benefits' were not appreciated by Jehovah's Witnesses caught up in the net of surveillance, control, denunciation and prison. Gisbert Scholze was jailed for eight years after the show trials in May 1951. After his release from the traumatic experience of prison, he recalls that he was subjected to regular surveillance and intimidation and could no longer trust his neighbours and work colleagues (see the interview in Schmidt, 2003b, p. 190). Many other Witnesses had a similar experience. While some appreciated the support which they sometimes received from their locality, they nevertheless felt threatened by a sense of being watched, whether by spies, the police or neighbours, especially at the time of the Memorial (or the Lord's Supper, a key event in the Society's calendar) and home bible studies (see the interviews in Schmidt, 2003b, pp. 208–11, 225).

With regard to the organisation of 'silent' persecution, an OPK often functioned as the prelude to an operational campaign, and was intended to ascertain whether evidence existed of an intention to commit an offence which infringed the politically instrumentalised GDR criminal code. If so, then an operational clandestine campaign (OV) could be launched to furnish proof. This was an elaborately organised and comprehensive form of surveillance conducted by the Stasi and was usually the culmination of a series of checks and enquiries. An OV was terminated either when proof of a crime was established or if an offence could be prevented. The 1985 ministry

regulation relating to the criteria for termination of an OV included ‘undermining, paralysing or rendering harmless the hostile forces in such a way that they only carry out their hostile activities at a low level of intensity and danger to society or they are not capable of any acute subversive activity...’ (Fuchs, 1997, pp. 12–13 (my translation)). Between 1985 and 1988 the Stasi was conducting about 4500 to 5000 OVs per annum (Raschka, 2001, p. 23). As indicated above, several OVs and suboperations might be combined under the umbrella of a central operational campaign. ZOV ‘Swamp’, for example, required close collaboration between Regional Administrations and District Service Units whose boundaries did not coincide with those of the Jehovah’s Witness regional bodies. Each OV and ZOV was required to set out the goals of the operation, the measures to be implemented, the projected time scale, the ways in which the Stasi would liaise with other organs of state and how unofficial co-workers (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* – IMs) were to be used.

‘Unofficial co-worker’, the Stasi euphemism for a spy or informer, is sometimes translated as unofficial collaborator. The rapid expansion of the ministry’s stock of IMs was testimony to the relentless search to know everything according to the principle ‘who is who’ and corresponded with the Stasi’s view of the agents as the ‘main weapon’ in the struggle against a ubiquitous enemy, without whom the ministry’s full-time officials would be unable to achieve their goals. One officer was following this line of thinking when he referred to the ‘goal-oriented, long-term and efficient’ deployment of IMs as the main method in the systematic decomposition of the Society (Bartnik, 1977, p. 16). The MfS classified its IMs according to an elaborate typology. They ranged from lowly agents who simply made their apartment, address or telephone available to the Stasi to the highly proactive agents who were integral to the coordinated campaigns which aimed to destroy their targets’ careers, reputations and lives. In addition to its IMs, the Stasi could draw on several other sources: the German People’s Police, which had its own agents attached to the Criminal Police; members of the SED; and what two Stasi officers involved in the subversion of Jehovah’s Witnesses referred to as ‘reliable persons’, such as pensioners and housewives (Kleinow and Wenzlawski, 1977, pp. 35–36).

As part of its relentless pursuit of Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Stasi was particularly keen to recruit informers from among the ranks of couriers and leading officials, notably the district, circuit and territory servants, so that it would be able to penetrate the innermost council of the Witness organisation, to identify pivotal figures, to track the organisation of the courier system and evangelising, and to obtain ‘insider’ information about the impact of decomposition measures. These proved to be elusive goals, partly because the Society frequently changed the ranking order of its servants in the congregations and study groups (Kleinow and Wenzlawski, 1977, p. 28) and partly because it took pre-emptive action against the MfS. For example, the so-called ‘fire-wall regulations’ debarred any Witness from holding an office who had once belonged to the SED, restrictions were placed on discussions between district, circuit and local congregation officials, and checks were carried out on the slightest suspicion of contact between a Witness and the Stasi (Kleinow and Wenzlawski, 1977, p. 43; Baenz, 1976, p. 10). The major obstacles to the recruitment of informers were not of an organisational and tactical nature, but the deep religious faith of the Witnesses and the Society’s singular concept of the secular world. According to Captain Kleinow and Major Wenzlawski, Witnesses regarded Stasi officers as the ‘tools of Satan’ and were imbued with a clear image of their enemy (Kleinow and Wenzlawski, 1977, p. 45). Given the zeal of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the barriers to penetration by the Stasi, brethren who collaborated with the Stasi tended to do so for only a short time

(Hirsch, 2003a, p. 124) and were more likely to be found on the periphery than at the heart of the Witness organisation (Kleinow and Wenzlawski, 1977, p. 28; Hirsch, 2003a, p. 126), a situation which caused Herbrich of Main Department XX/4 to complain about the inadequacies of the work with IMs (Protokoll, 1987, p. 48). Although statistics on the overall numbers of IMs deployed against the Jehovah's Witnesses have yet to be unearthed, an analysis of the stock of IMs run by Department XX/4 of the Karl-Marx-Stadt Region, located in one of the main centres of Witness activity, provides some idea of relative weightings. Out of a total of 67 IMs, only five were used against the Jehovah's Witnesses, as opposed to 42 against the Evangelical-Lutheran Churches (Analyse, 1970, p. 171).

The MfS provided recruiting officers with a template for identifying the personality traits of the 'model' IM. With regard to Jehovah's Witnesses, the Stasi favoured the recruitment of young, single men as this would help to avoid the conflicts of conscience and other problems arising from married life and partly because women tended to be located on the edge of the Witness organisational structures (Baenz, 1976, pp. 7, 17–18). Recognising, however, that the Society encouraged younger single males to marry, officers Kleinow and Wenzlawski advocated the recruitment of single or divorced middle-aged men who were unlikely to marry in the near future and urged that consideration also be given to childless couples or couples whose children had become independent. The drawbacks to the latter course, a last resort in the opinion of Kleinow and Wenzlawski, were the serious difficulties in adjusting to life as a Witness and, on account of age, a lower chance of attaining a leading post (Kleinow and Wenzlawski, 1977, pp. 51–52). Other personality traits which were held to be compatible with a 'model' Jehovah's Witness were a high level of intelligence, reliability, an unassuming nature, faithfulness in marriage and abstemious behaviour (Kleinow and Wenzlawski, 1977, p. 54). These criteria were so exacting that the Stasi had to lower its sights and recruit candidates who met only some of the prerequisites. Careful training and preparation by controllers would, it was hoped, enable them to carry out their duties as IMs conscientiously and efficiently (Kleinow and Wenzlawski, 1977, pp. 91, 93–94).

As 'true believers' were expected to be the most productive and the most committed agents, the Stasi was particularly keen to recruit individuals who were well disposed to the GDR's brand of socialism or who held Marxist-Leninist convictions. However, as Jehovah's Witnesses were unlikely to meet these requirements, other levers had to be used, or, as Herbrich told fellow officers, 'to use all chances, all possibilities' (Arbeitsbuch, 1978, p. 34). Officers' dissertations show that recruiters and controllers were certainly not squeamish about using blackmail and other nefarious methods (see Kownatzski, 1979, pp. 19–22; Bartnik, 1977, p. 29; Kleinow and Wenzlawski, 1977, p. 39). Infidelity, a penal offence, an interest in pornography, excessive consumption of alcohol, profligacy, the desire for an apartment were all used as levers to enlist Witnesses or interested persons as agents. Young Jehovah's Witnesses were regarded as especially vulnerable if they could be detached from the influence of experienced members of their congregation for a lengthy period, for example in prison or at a holiday camp. Those who were serving a prison sentence for refusing to do military service should, it was recommended, be approached by IMs among the other prisoners and by the prison's cultural and education section (Bartnik, 1977, pp. 30–31).

As Jehovah's Witnesses proved so resistant to the blandishments of the Stasi, the ministry was forced to seek recruits from outside the Society. This posed many problems for controllers as their charges would be obliged to adapt to a completely different lifestyle and to the Witness belief system. They were expected to withdraw

from politics, retreat into the intimate world of the congregations, possibly forgo watching TV and raise their children according to Society doctrines. An alternative course was to entice former Witnesses; however, if an IM returned unwillingly to the Witness fold, his controllers had reason to fear that he would make a further attempt to cut his links with the Society (Kleinow and Wenzlowski, 1977, pp. 39, 42).

### **Stasi Operations against the Witnesses**

Countless declassified Stasi sources, among them ZOV 'Swamp' monitoring reports, reveal in detail how the ministry planned and carried out a plethora of dirty tricks as part of its operational decomposition strategy. Among the covert measures were: unconcealed surveillance of places where baptisms, bible study and other activities were held in order to intimidate Witnesses; discrediting brethren in anonymous letters; encouraging rumours that certain Witnesses were Stasi informers; sending anonymous or pseudonymous complaints to the Eastern Bureau in Wiesbaden; and seeking to destroy the reputation of leaders by allegations of immorality and criminal behaviour (Bergner, 1976, pp. 31–32, 34; Kleinow and Wenzlowski, 1977, pp. 91, 93–95). Stasi units were urged to be 'innovative': tried and tested measures should be combined with new ones as part of what Lieutenant Kownatzki called 'their creative application' in order to catch Witnesses off-guard (Kownatzki, 1979, pp. 15–16). The depths to which the Stasi plunged are apparent from Lieutenant Bergner's account of a 'successful operation' against a Witness functionary in 1965. After an IM had discovered that the official had allegedly touched a young girl's genitals while she was out walking with him and her mother, a letter campaign resulted in the official's dismissal from his post (Bergner, 1976, pp. 31–32). There was, it should be stressed, no proof that an offence had been committed. Bergner's dissertation received the rating 'very good' from the Stasi assessor, who commended it for its 'scientific' approach and for its contribution to practical work (Bergner, 1976, pp. 49–50).

MfS central and regional agencies were determined to integrate individual decomposition measures into the complex operational clandestine campaigns (OVs). Despite, and sometimes because of, the attention to the minutiae of an operation, OVs were often not terminated as quickly as was desired. Herbrich acknowledged this at a meeting of Regional Administrations in March 1972 when he urged officers not to allow OVs against Jehovah's Witnesses to drift (Bericht, 1972, p. 27). OV 'Diener' ('Servant'), which was launched in June 1978 against a Witness who lived in Salmünde, can be taken as one example among many as to how a clandestine operation functioned. The Stasi's Saalkreis District Service Unit in the Halle Regional Administration was responsible for the campaign and submitted regular progress reports between the OV's initiation in 1978 and its termination in January 1983. The main target of the operation was a *Gebietsdiener* whose local congregation was active in the recruitment of new brethren, the organisation of bible study groups and the cultivation of contacts with the West and Potsdam. The aims of the OV were to uncover the target person's 'subversive' activities, to eliminate the courier links with Wiesbaden and, in general, to liquidate the activities of members of the 'sect' by means of focused decomposition measures. 'Focused' was a favourite term of the Stasi as it implied efficiency and accurate targeting. In conjunction with the police and the public prosecutor, houses were searched, Witnesses were interrogated and the Stasi seized Witness literature such as *Awake!* and *The Watchtower*. Although in their final report the Stasi officers congratulated themselves on the fulfilment of the operation's aims, their admission that decomposition had been only a temporary success demonstrates

just how difficult it was for the ministry to deliver a decisive blow. Ordinary brethren and servants, it emerges from the report, continued with their preaching and other activities in even greater secrecy and some, like the chief target of OV 'Diener', moved to another area (Eröffnungsbericht, 1978, pp. 2–5; Abschlußbericht, 1983, pp. 9–12).

OV 'Diener' is indicative of the wide range of Witness activities and individuals which the Stasi sought to suppress by means of this type of operation. Leading servants, the courier system, bible study, baptism, house-to-house calls, the annual Memorial and external contacts all came under the ministry's microscope. The Memorial, a key event in the Society's calendar, was attended by thousands of publishers and interested persons and every effort was made to keep the location of the ceremony secret. A cat-and-mouse game took place in which the Stasi and the police, as well as factory management, sought to identify the location and put pressure on Witnesses to try and dissuade them from attending the service, especially if it was not held in the privacy of their own home. 'Preventive talks' with ordinary publishers and 'disciplinary talks' with the so-called 'hard core' were the Stasi's favoured methods of intimidation.

Although Stasi Regional Administrations devoted considerable time to the disruption of the Memorial, head office in East Berlin was often dissatisfied with the outcome. For example, in 1985, of the 15 Regional Administrations only two, Neubrandenburg and Potsdam, had managed to obstruct the celebrations in their area of responsibility (Information, 1985, p. 614). Four years later, the 15 disciplinary and preventive talks conducted by the Leipzig Regional Administration with Witness leaders and active brethren had discouraged some members from attending the Memorial, but others had seized the opportunity of contact with Stasi personnel to press for a lifting of the ban on the organisation or to glean information about the security organs (Politisch-operative, 1989, pp. 15–17). A crude overall cost-benefit analysis of the Stasi's campaigns against the Memorial shows how resources were dissipated, as in the two-day IM surveillance in 1988 of Helmut Jahn, a *Kreisaufseher* from Schwerin. The case file runs to 11 pages and abounds with trivia, such as when the family left the house and the time spent by IMs on surveillance. The IMs took up their observation post at 7.00 hours on the day of the Memorial; they had nothing meaningful to report until 18.40 hours! (Hirsch, 2003b, p. 188).

As discussed above, the Jehovah's Witness courier and communication system was the lifeline of the Watchtower Society. It kept the local congregations in touch with developments in the Society at large, helped strengthen their resolve in the face of persecution and gave them access to the spiritual food, such as audio cassettes, books, and *The Watchtower*, which was crucial for sustaining their faith and activities. *The Watchtower* was particularly important for providing direction and guidance in religious matters and for underpinning doctrinal uniformity. Although the building of the Berlin Wall severely disrupted links with the Federal Republic, many of these were soon restored and further opportunities arose with the easing of East-West relations and the sharp increase in personal contacts from the early 1970s onwards. West German pensioners smuggled literature into the GDR; materials were posted to non-Witness friends or acquaintances for redistribution in the GDR; magazines were reproduced on microfilm as well as in reduced format on thin paper; duplicating facilities were set up in the GDR; a cover name was devised for each courier and courier link; and cover addresses were used for the receipt of literature. In addition, a communication system was developed in the GDR for the secret transfer of materials by couriers using the official transit routes and special drop-off points on trains. Links were not confined to the two German republics but extended to the Scandinavian

countries and neighbouring Poland and Czechoslovakia (Information, 1977, pp. 2–4; Prescher, 1980, pp. 5, 7).

Stasi operations against these clandestine networks demanded a high level of coordination between Main Department XX/4, individual desks in Department XX of the 15 Regional Administrations, Main Departments VI, VIII and IX, and the GDR customs authorities. Main Department XX/4 was expected to uncover and pass on information about the plans of the Eastern Bureau as regards couriers, Main Department VIII to keep the couriers and their contacts under constant supervision, and Main Department IX to advise on the appropriate penal measures (Prescher, 1980, pp. 15–16, 20–24). Heavy fines were imposed, especially in the 1980s, on those who were trapped by the customs authorities. When in 1987 one car driver was caught smuggling 150 copies of a magazine into the country, as he had been doing for the last five years, he was fined DM 1000 (Hirsch, 2003b, p. 176).

The Stasi frequently boasted of the success of its operations against the courier system. According to Herbrich, about 70 per cent of material failed to reach Witnesses in the GDR in 1972 (Bericht, 1972, p. 27) and the ministry calculated that 69 courier links had been put out of action between 1976 and 1983 (Protokoll, 1986b, p. 8). In one of many such operations, a tip-off by an IM revealed that a courier, a former GDR citizen with contacts in the Dölbeln District, had managed to smuggle into the GDR about 24,000 copies of *The Watchtower* and 3200 books between June 1976 and March 1978 (Prescher, 1980, pp. 12–13, 18–19). These operations and Herbrich's claim notwithstanding, problems abounded. Information moved slowly down the line from Main Department XX/4 to the local Stasi units, and officers sometimes lacked the requisite knowledge and training (Prescher, 1980, pp. 35–36). The Schwerin Regional Administration admitted in 1985 that although evidence existed of an organised courier system in the Region, conclusive proof was lacking; furthermore, literature was reaching Witnesses more quickly in 1984 than in the previous year (Einschätzung, 1985b, pp. 29–30). In its review of the year 1986, Main Department XX disclosed that the courier system provided Witnesses with a relatively regular supply of Society materials, including about 20,000 copies every fortnight of the special GDR edition of *The Watchtower*, together with thousands of books and pamphlets (Hirsch, 2003a, p. 182).

Although this assessment of the Stasi's panoply of decomposition measures could be extended, space permits a comment on only one further aspect, the Christian Responsibility group (*Christliche Verantwortung* – CV). Highly regarded by the Stasi as an instrument of decomposition, Herbrich describing it as 'the main means in the offensive against the Witness organisation' (Einschätzung, 1982, p. 14), the group was founded as an association in Gera in 1965 and was subsequently run by the Region's Department XX. Willy Müller, the editor of the group's eponymous journal until his retirement on health grounds in 1970, was recruited in 1959 as an IM (IM 'Rolf') under duress while serving a prison sentence. He had been a leading servant in Thuringia and Gera North (Besier, 2003, p. 145). Other pivotal figures in the association were Dieter Pape (IME 'Wilhelm'), Müller's successor, Karl-Heinz Simdorn (alias Wolfgang Daum, IME 'Wolfgang') and the last editor of the journal, Werner Henry Struck (IME 'Rolf') (Hirsch, 2003b, pp. 291–300, 359). By promoting a critical attitude among readers of the journal, it was hoped to persuade Witnesses to break with the Watchtower Society and also, with the aid of IMs, to undermine the Witness organisation 'from within' (Gegenwärtige, 1985, p. 2). In order to further its aims, the Stasi also arranged for the journal to be sent to Witnesses both inside and outside the GDR as well as to other religious communities, such as the Protestant and

Catholic Churches. The circulation was raised to about 6000 copies in 1984 (Hirsch, 2003b, p. 360). While CV was well-regarded by some non-Witnesses, the poor quality of the journal's articles and the association's thinly-disguised political agenda aroused the suspicions of Witnesses and rendered it ineffective as an instrument of decomposition (Hirsch, 2003b, pp. 373–39, 398–99; Schmidt, 2003b, pp. 268–69).

### **Administrative Fines**

From early 1967 onwards the GDR authorities, increasingly sensitive to domestic and international opinion, no longer imprisoned Witnesses on criminal charges for their mission activities. Instead, the security forces sought to intimidate brethren by drawing on their repertoire of 'dirty tricks' and by making extensive use of the possibilities afforded by the minor offences legislation, in particular the 1968 revised Ordinance on the Authorisation of Printed Materials, the 1968 Decree on Minor Offences and the 1975 Decree on the Formation of Associations. Fines of 10 to 300 Marks, and on occasions even 1000 Marks, were imposed for infringements relating to these decrees. Fines were increased if Witnesses re-offended (Hacke, 2000, p. 80; Hirsch, 2003b, pp. 166–72; Wenzlawski and Kleinow, 1975, p. 100). Administrative offence procedures rose sharply from 96 to 269 between 1983 and 1984. Two years later the number stood at 310, a slight fall from 324 in the previous year (Hirsch, 2003b, pp. 168–70). In 1987, a fine of up to 100 Marks was imposed in 50 and over 500 Marks in 31 out of the overall total of 317 procedures (Information, 1988, p. 105).

Bible study groups, door-to-door visits and the distribution of literature were among the main activities targeted by the Stasi and police for harassment by means of administrative offence procedures. As proselytising by door-to-door-visits was central for service as a Jehovah's Witness, many were willing to brave police and Stasi persecution. While they took precautions, for example varying the time and the order in which houses were visited, other Witnesses, understandably, felt unable to cope with the stress associated with house-to-house calls, opting instead for informal and less open forms of field service (see the interview with Sabine D. in Schmidt, 2003a, p. 193). Financial penalties could be heavy. In 1983 one Witness was fined 300 Marks for calling on citizens in their apartments in Angermünde and another publisher had to pay 50 Marks for approaching people in a cemetery in Hoyerswerda (Übersicht, 1984, p. 47). When a sister from the congregation in Gera, Marianne Büchner, refused to pay a fine of 700 Marks for preaching in a village, 100 Marks were deducted from her monthly wage (Eichler, 2001, p. 74).

Partly because many Jehovah's Witnesses appealed against their fines, often using their constitutional right to submit a petition (*Eingabe*) to state leaders, and formally contested the legal basis of the whole procedure, Herbrich reminded his subordinates at a meeting in 1986 that 'spectacular actions' should be avoided when implementing minor offences legislation (Protokoll, 1986b, pp. 24–25). In accordance with this precept, the Stasi's Main Departments XX/4 and IX and the Main Department of the Constabulary Police had been trying since 1982 to standardise procedures to ensure a smooth coordination between the Police District Offices and the Stasi's District Service Units operating in the localities (Einschätzung, 1985a, p. 80; Dirksen, 2001a, pp. 792–802). The results of the new approach were patchy. In 1986 Department XX in the Leipzig Region admitted that the five administrative offence procedures had not achieved the desired 'decomposition' effect. Offenders had not been identified and the police had devoted insufficient time to the cases (Lageeinschätzung, 1986, p. 47). One final statistic highlights the limited impact of the police and the Stasi on Witness field

service: between June 1984 and July 1985 the time spent by Witnesses on initial house-to-house visits had increased by about 61,000 hours and back-calls by about 10,000 hours.<sup>4</sup>

The Stasi was just as determined to restrict home bible study as it was to prevent house-to-house evangelising. Bible study groups met once per week, and from the mid-1960s twice per week. Numbers hovered around four to six persons, even expanding to between 10 and 15 at the 'mini-congresses' of the 1980s (Hirsch, 2003b, pp. 158–59). Bible study, talks on religion, baptisms, assisting brethren who had been fined and many other links all helped to bind members together in what Schmidt has called a 'community of solidarity' (Schmidt, 2003a, p. 259). Fines, together with IM surveillance and oral warnings, were just some of the weapons used by the police and Stasi against the bible study groups. The latter sought to confuse the Stasi and its snoopers by gathering in small numbers, changing the time of meetings and addressing each other only by first name. However, as SED rule drew towards a close, bible study groups benefited from the general improvement in the situation of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Goran Westphal's study of the congregation in Weimar has shown that from the mid-1980s onwards, Witnesses began to sing during meetings. One married couple, Bettina and Peter Brüggemeier, recalls that they enjoyed good relations with neighbours and had few problems with the police for not casting their vote in elections. They did acknowledge, however, that the atmosphere was more liberal in Weimar than in a town such as Gera.<sup>5</sup>

### **Military Service**

Of all the Jehovah's Witnesses' alleged offences, it was their refusal to serve in the military on grounds of conscience which was most severely punished by the East German authorities. Although the SED introduced military conscription in 1962, it became possible two years later to opt for the alternative of service in a construction unit. As the Society's doctrine did not require total conscientious objection, an unknown number of Witnesses chose to become construction soldiers. Many refused to take advantage of this provision, partly because they perceived, correctly, that it was not a genuine civilian alternative to normal military service. The consequence was that thousands of Witnesses were prosecuted as conscientious objectors in the Military Courts according to the Military Service Laws of 1962 and 1982 and other discriminatory legislation. Between 1983 and 1987, 2750 Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested and imprisoned for periods of between 18 and 24 months for refusing to serve in the armed forces. The length of a sentence was normally 20 months (Dirksen, 2001, pp. 866, 868, 875). The suffering of the Witnesses in prison, one of the darkest chapters in the history of the GDR, is described elsewhere in this issue of *RSS* by Johannes Wrobel. Not until the Cold War began to draw to its close in the mid-1980s did the East German authorities become less draconian, no longer punishing Jehovah's Witnesses after 1986 for refusing to serve in the armed forces. On the other hand, old habits died hard as the military authorities tried to prevent Witnesses avoiding military service.

Before Witnesses were imprisoned, many had already suffered discrimination at school and, even in the less oppressive 1980s, were frequently deprived of an apprenticeship for refusing to take part in various forms of pre-military education at school or in organisations such as the Society for Sport and Technology.<sup>6</sup> As this was also combined with a refusal to join the Free German Youth, the door was closed on study for the *Abitur* at the Extended Upper School or entry to a university. The

militarisation of school life received a powerful boost in 1978 when the SED imposed the highly controversial compulsory theoretical and practical pre-military training in schools for pupils aged 14 to 16. This was linked, according to the SED, to the need for members of society to demonstrate their love for, and willingness to defend, the socialist fatherland. The new measures created an additional personal dilemma and acute stress for Witness families, even though parents were sometimes able to reach a compromise with the schools. A general survey by the Stasi in 1983 of reactions to instruction in the use of weapons indicated that some Witnesses allowed their children to participate in this activity, albeit passively. The children did not, for example, become involved in marching and in practice with air guns and hand grenades. While some schools devised *ad hoc* solutions by allowing children to go home or finding them cleaning jobs (Bericht, 1983, pp. 55–56), most young Witnesses had to endure social and educational discrimination and various forms of isolation, a situation which served to reinforce the importance of the compensatory support provided by their families, their congregations, their like-minded peers and their faith (Schmidt, 2003b, pp. 285–86).

### **Assessment of Stasi Persecution**

Data on membership of the Watchtower Society in the GDR highlight the Stasi's failure to achieve its main goal – the liquidation of the Witness organisation – and help explain why the ministry had to settle for a policy of containment, or, as Main Department XX/4 expressed it, keeping the Witnesses 'as a whole ... under control'.<sup>7</sup> According to Hans-Hermann Dirksen's investigations, there were about 23,160 publishers in 1950 and only slightly fewer, about 21,160, 40 years later (Dirksen, 2001a, pp. 864–67). In the intervening decades, numbers fluctuated, mainly as a result of state persecution. After the ban on the organisation, membership dropped sharply only to recover quickly in 1952, reaching 20,292 in the following year. The upward trend between 1963 and 1975 was checked by disappointment among members at the failure of the Watchtower and Bible Tract Society's prophecy that Armageddon would occur in 1975. Numbers did not begin to rise again until 1980, reaching a peak of 22,821 in 1988. Membership figures do not, it should be stressed, provide a full picture as they do not take account of interested persons and the thousands of non-publishers who celebrated the Lord's Supper each year. About 15,000 attended the Memorial in 1973, and a similar number in 1988.

While these figures are indicative of the ultimate failure of the Stasi, ministry reports are full of references to 'successes' in its campaigns against the Jehovah's Witnesses: the creation of a comprehensive data bank on the Witness community; continuous surveillance of the activities of brethren and evangelisers; the penetration of the Eastern Bureau and the disruption of its communications with East Germany; the recruitment of some informers among Witnesses; the nurturing of the CV 'opposition movement'; the dissolution of organisational structures; the removal of key leaders; impeding recruitment and baptism; and the disruption of the Memorial, home bible studies and congregation meetings. On occasions, notably in 1950–51, the Stasi seemed to be on the verge of liquidating the Society in the GDR. Once this had proved beyond its reach, the emphasis was switched from open repression to gradual decomposition and the transformation of the Witnesses into a tame religious community. But, as Main Department XX/4 and its units in the Regional Administrations were forced to recognise, covert measures against the Witnesses, albeit combined with overt punitive actions, such as imprisonment and fines, did not

have a lasting impact. The transience of ‘negative successes’ is a thread which runs through Stasi assessments of its persecution of the Witnesses from the early 1950s to the late 1980s (Dirksen, 2001b, p. 19). The following remarks in a report issued by Department XX of the Schwerin Regional Administration in 1984 are typical:

... no long-term uncertainty has been achieved by the implementation of the political decomposition measures. Only for a relatively short period of time of up to about half a year after carrying out these measures did a decline in activities occur and then predominantly only among those members directly affected or in the particular congregation... (Analyse, 1984, p. 8 (my translation))

Inadequacies in coordinating operations between the District Service Units and the specialist department in overall charge had, it was admitted, enabled Witness leaders to regroup and ‘discipline’ their members (Analyse, 1984, p. 21).

This admission underlines the significance of factors which are inherent in the structures and role of the Stasi and which provide part of the explanation for the ministry’s limited success. Confronted by determined opponents such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, whose organisational structures did not correspond with those of the GDR and its security forces, a high level of coordination was required between the forces of the Stasi and the police, as well as between the Stasi’s own units. Given the plethora of other tasks which the ministry was increasingly driven to perform, ranging from the Canute-like task of stemming emigration and flight from the GDR to patching up the many cracks in the country’s ailing economy, the Stasi’s local and regional units were often overworked and their resources spread too thinly (Kleinow and Wenzlawski, 1977, p. 106). It is therefore not surprising that the Halle Regional Administration in 1986 should admit that its District Service Units did not regard the Jehovah’s Witnesses as a priority (Protokoll, 1986a, p. 28). In the mid-1980s the situation was even more problematic in the Erfurt Region: no operations had taken place against Witnesses in recent years on account of other more pressing matters (Anhang, 1985, p. 13). Even when operations were conducted elsewhere, as against Martin Jahn on the occasion of the 1988 Memorial, resources were dissipated on passive surveillance. And a reading of Stasi reports from the 1980s suggests that many of the control measures which officers and IMs carried out in connection with the annual Memorial were more a matter of routine than a crucial element in the struggle against ‘hostile’ forces (Hirsch, 2003b, pp. 189–91).

The Stasi’s wide-ranging remit meant that local units lacked an IM base which might have enabled them to penetrate the inner sanctum of the Watchtower Society.<sup>8</sup> Without sufficient ‘eyes and ears’ and other resources, the ministry frequently failed to uncover the Witness organisational structures and to identify leading servants; this fundamental failing caused much soul-searching at the coordination meetings which Main Department XX/4 held with representatives from the Regional Administrations.<sup>9</sup> Even on those occasions when the Stasi utilised Witnesses as IMs in key operations, it was still unable to overcome some of its intrinsic difficulties and found itself outwitted. A comparison between an analysis by the Stasi’s Karl-Marx-Stadt Regional Administration and the post-unification recollections of a leading Witness illustrates this point. In 1979 the Karl-Marx-Stadt office congratulated itself on decomposition measures which had led to the breakup and suspension for three years of a Kingdom Ministry School run in Zwickau for leading preachers and to the

suspension of the instructor, Martin Jahn, from his office for one year. This had been achieved with the aid of two IMs in Zwickau, IM 'Günther' and IMB 'Kreutzer' (also IMB 'Quermann'), who were both elders (Riedel, 1978, pp. 14–28; Jahn, 2001, pp. 12–15; Hirsch, 2001a, pp. 68–73). However, in an article written after the collapse of the GDR, Martin Jahn disclosed that the Stasi had been outmanoeuvred: aware that Stasi agents were probably among them, Jahn had informed the local elders of the suspension of the School; in reality, training continued in secret and neither he nor the *Kreisdiener*, Horst Kolbe, had stepped down from office (Jahn, 2001, pp. 11–14; also Hirsch, 2001a, pp. 68–73). Moving from the local to the central level, the Stasi's knowledge gap is also apparent from Main Department XX/4's assessment of ZOV 'Swamp' in 1986–87. Two out of 18 top officials had not been unmasked and 21 *Kreisaufseher*, 73 *Gebietsdiener* and about 1300 local *Gemeindevorstandlichen* could not be named.<sup>10</sup>

Surviving persecution was not, however, just an outcome of the Stasi's own intrinsic weaknesses and problems; an explanation must also be sought in the organisational structures and the doctrines of the Society, as well as in the faith of the brethren themselves. The Witness policy of self-defence was frequently conducted under the direction of the Eastern Bureau in the Federal Republic. Not only did this encompass the regular restructuring of the Witness organisation in the GDR and improvements in the training of leading servants but also the tightening of internal security according to the fire-wall principle and the rebuilding of courier links (Protokoll, 1985, pp. 7–11). The Society did not, however, confine itself to protecting itself within its own walls: when it was deemed opportune, members were encouraged to protest openly against OVs, administrative fines and other forms of intimidation. But it was, above all, the Witnesses' faith and their solidarity as a community which enabled them to withstand, often with great stoicism, decomposition and liquidation measures. As discussed earlier, brethren were united by a number of shared beliefs and activities: a deep religious conviction underpinned by the prospect of the post-Armageddon Kingdom; the ingenuity required to obtain and distribute Watchtower literature; the intensive study and internalisation of the teachings of the Society; the conversion and baptism of new brethren; the personal dedication of elders and other servants; the widespread belief in the need for discipline in, and obedience to, Watchtower Society instructions and organisational guidelines; the use of disfellowshipping and other measures as sanctions against deviance; the perception of persecution as a test and confirmation of faith and mission work; the awareness of belonging to a world-wide organisation; and the financial and psychological assistance given to congregation members who were fined and imprisoned (see Schmidt, 2003b, pp. 262–66, 272–76, 283–84, 293–95, 299–302). Although Stasi officers paid tribute to the organisational resilience of the Watchtower Society and the effectiveness of its 'conspiratorial' measures, they failed to appreciate the vital significance and depth of the Witnesses' faith as their image of the brethren was clouded by the ministry's Marxist-Leninist ideology and the concomitant perception of the Society as a tool of ultra-reactionary imperialism.

Finally, the fate of Jehovah's Witnesses in the GDR was interwoven with the external environment: not only were they dependent on support from the West German Branch Office and the Eastern Bureau but also on developments in the Soviet Union and its client states, as well as on East-West relations in general. Détente, for example, had a decisive influence on the shaping of the 'silent terror' of decomposition. The repercussions of the general crisis of the communist system in

the 1980s were of greater significance, however. The relaxation of persecution against Jehovah's Witnesses in Hungary and Poland in the mid-1980s and the advent of Gorbachev to power in the Soviet Union in 1985 were a source of great encouragement for the East German brethren and raised expectations of a lifting of the ban on their organisation. In the GDR itself, the final quinquennium of SED rule was a time in which hope and coercion coexisted (Hacke, 2000, p. 264). On the one hand, Jehovah's Witnesses were no longer imprisoned for refusing military service and they were able to conduct religious services more openly. They were not, however, free of intimidation and repression as regards mission work, the celebration of the Memorial and job and training opportunities. Indeed, it would not be until 14 March 1990, several months after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the SED, that the coalition government of Hans Modrow of the PDS lifted the ban and the Witness organisation in the GDR finally received legal recognition from the state authorities as a religious community.

### Abbreviations

BStU	Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic)
BV	Bezirksverwaltung (Regional Administration of the Ministry of State Security)
CV	Christliche Verantwortung (Christian Responsibility)
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GDR	German Democratic Republic
HA	Hauptabteilung (Main Department of the Ministry of State Security)
IM	Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter (Unofficial Collaborator/Co-worker)
IMB	Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter zur unmittelbaren Bearbeitung im Verdacht der Feindtätigkeit stehender Personen (Unofficial Collaborator for Dealing with Persons under Suspicion of Hostile Activity)
IME	Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter für einen besonderen Einsatz (Unofficial Collaborator for a Special Assignment)
JHS	Juristische Hochschule (College of Legal Studies of the Ministry of State Security)
KD	Kreisdienststelle (District Service Unit of the Ministry of State Security)
MfS	Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Ministry of State Security, also Stasi)
OV	Operativer Vorgang (Integrated Operational Clandestine Campaign or Operational Case)
PDS	Party of Democratic Socialism
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany)
Stasi	see MfS
WTS	Watchtower Society (also Watchtower Bible and Tract Society)
ZA	Zentralarchiv (Central Archive of the BStU)
ZOV	Zentraler Operativer Vorgang (Central Operational Case)

### Notes

- 1 A list of the dissertations, with abbreviated titles, their authors and their archival classification can be found in the References section.

- 2 Riedel was a captain in the Stasi's Karl-Marx-Stadt Regional Administration. His view echoed that of his superior officer in Main Department XX/4, Oskar Herbrich, who at a meeting with the Karl-Marx-Stadt Regional Administration in 1974 stated that the political-ideological diversion of the Jehovah's Witnesses consisted of a blind anticommunism, and an end-of-the-world view, whose aim was to undermine the loyalty and socialist consciousness of GDR citizens (Bericht, 1974, p. 158).
- 3 The six Stasi Regional Administrations which ran sub-operations were Leipzig, Halle, Magdeburg, Erfurt, Dresden and East Berlin. OV 'Thurm', which had commenced in the Karl-Marx-Stadt Region before the ZOV was launched, was attached to the ZOV as an OV. For details, see Dirksen, 2001a, pp. 681–82.
- 4 Information, 1986, pp. 2–3. Stasi operatives acquired the data from Eastern Bureau records.
- 5 Westphal, 2001, p. 247. Eichler, 2001, p. 77, mentions that at the end of the 1980s singing took place both at the beginning and at the end of meetings in Gera.
- 6 Before 1982 young Jehovah's Witnesses were normally unable to commence an apprenticeship, but when from September of that year pre-military education became a compulsory element of training as an apprentice, the door was completely closed: see Hacke, 2000, p. 265.
- 7 Hirsch, 2003b, p. 153.
- 8 This was the tone of the comments by the Regional Administrations of Halle, Erfurt, Suhl, Gera and Leipzig: Protokoll, 1986a, pp. 28–31.
- 9 See Herbrich's comments in Protokoll, 1987, p. 43.
- 10 See Hirsch, 2003b, p. 152.

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