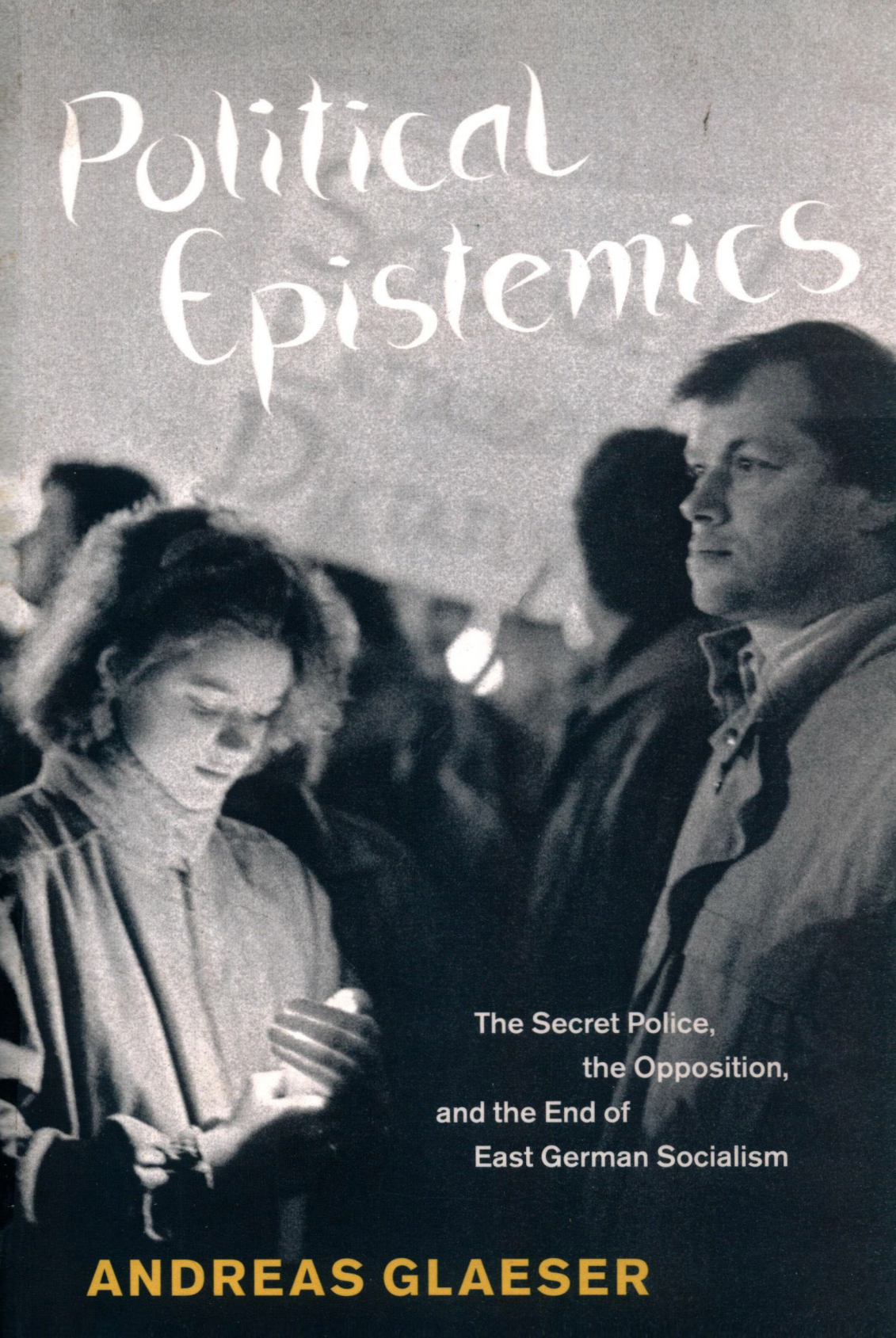


Political Epistemics



The Secret Police,
the Opposition,
and the End of
East German Socialism

ANDREAS GLAESER

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and the End of East German Socialism

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Abbreviations

For ease of reading I have kept current standard English abbreviations for the institutions discussed in this book (as, for example, in GDR) even though they are inconsistently oscillating between translation (e.g., CPSU) transliteration (e.g., KGB) and phonetic transcriptions (e.g., Cheka). Wherever there is no standard English usage I have retained the German abbreviations simply because I fear that the translation of acronyms can only add confusion in relation to the original language documents. Thus I keep Stasi rather than translating it into what might have been taken for an English equivalent such as Stasec (State Security) or I have kept SED rather than translating it into SUP for Socialist Unity Party, even though I do use the English long form. However, I have translated all Russian acronyms if there is no standard English form (e.g., CC for Central Committee) simply because the movement from Cyrillic to Roman script requires transliteration anyway, and because I do not make any references to untranslated Russian sources.

ADN	<i>Allgemeine deutsche Nachrichtendienst</i> (GDR newswire service)
BL	<i>Bezirksleitung der SED</i> (District Office of the SED)
BfS	<i>Bezirksverwaltung für Staatssicherheit</i> (district office for state security)
BStU	<i>Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen der ehemaligen Staatssicherheit der DDR</i> (Federal officer for the documents of the former state security of the GDR)
Cheka	(All Russian) Extraordinary Commission (for Combatting Counterrevolution and Sabotage), originally VcheKa, name of the Soviet secret police until 1922, subsequently called GPU, OGPU, NKVD, MGB and KGB.
Comintern	Communist International, sometimes also called the Third International.
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union

XII Abbreviations

CC	Central Committee of the CPSU or the SED
CDU	<i>Christlich Demokratische Union</i> (Christian Democratic Union) (West) Germany's conservative mass party in all states except Bavaria
CSCE	Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (also, Helsinki process)
CSU	<i>Christlich Soziale Union</i> (Christian Social Union) the Bavarian counterpart of the CDU
DDR	<i>Deutsche Demokratische Republik</i> (German Democratic Republic)
FDGB	<i>Freier deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund</i> (Free German Federation of Trade Unions)
FDJ	<i>Freie Deutsche Jugend</i> (Free German Youth), official socialist youth organization in the GDR
GDR	German Democratic Republic (translation of DDR)
Gestapo	<i>Geheime Staatspolizei</i> (secret state police of Nazi Germany)
IFM	<i>Initiative für Frieden und Menschenrechte</i> (Initiative for Peace and Human rights)
KGB	<i>Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti</i> (Committee for State Security), the Soviet secret police, named thus since 1954
KPD	<i>Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands</i> (Communist Party of Germany)
MGB	(Ministry for State Security), name of the Soviet secret police between 1946 and 1954.
MfS	<i>Ministerium für Staatssicherheit</i> (Ministry for State Security) used to designate the whole apparatus as well as more specifically its ministerial level (as opposed to the district or county level)
NKFD	<i>Nationalkomitee freies Deutschland</i> (National Committee for a Free Germany), antifascist organization of German soldiers initiated and supported by the Soviet Union among German POWs in the SU
NKVD	(People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs), name of the Soviet secret police between 1934 and 1946
NÖSPL	<i>Neues ökonomisches System der Planung und Leitung</i> (new economic system of planning and steering)
M-L	<i>Marxismus-Leninismus</i> (Marxism-Leninism), standard abbreviation used throughout eastern Europe
NSdAP	<i>Nationalsozialistische deutsche Arbeiterpartei</i> (Nationalsozialist German Workersparty)
RIAS	<i>Radio in the American Sector</i> [of Berlin] (Radio im Amerikanischen Sektor)

SED	<i>Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands</i> (Socialist Unity Party of Germany), the Nazi party
SMAD	<i>Sovietische Militäradministration in Deutschland</i> (Soviet Military Administration in Germany)
SPD	<i>Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> (Socialdemocratic Party of Germany)
Stasi	<i>Staatssicherheit</i> ; the popularly used acronym for MfS
UB	<i>Umweltbibliothek</i> ("Environmental Library")
VdN	<i>Verfolgte(r) des Naziregimes</i> ([person] persecuted by the Nazi regime)
ZK	<i>Zentralkomitee der SED</i> (Central Committee of the SED)

Preface

Two threads of argument entwine each other in this book. First, a theoretical strand offers sustained meditations on the dialectical relationship between the development of peoples' understandings of the social world as formed and transformed in everyday experiences and the rise and decline of political institutions created and recreated by their actions. More, it lays out in detail the dynamics through which this dialectic operates. Its particular claim is that processes of validation—that is, the interconnection of events certifying understandings across time—play a central role in these dynamics. Consequently, the book argues for a focus on processes of validation as an analytic angle from which the dynamics of institutions can be comprehended. Second, an historical strand of argument offers a reinterpretation of East German state socialism by analyzing it as an unacknowledged attempt to perform a revolutionary self-fulfilling prophecy. This perspective also enables an account of socialism's failure, which focuses on the GDR elites' failure to produce understandings of the everyday operations of socialism adequate to the maintenance of its institutions through timely reforms. I will speak in this sense of an epistemic explanation of the failure of socialism in contrast to the currently prevalent variants of economic and political systems accounts. My point is not that these are altogether wrong. They do provide valuable pieces for an answer to the puzzle of socialism's failure by guiding our attention to perverse incentive schemes and to institutional rigidities. Rather, I would like to argue that there is a dimension to socialism's demise that has so far not been properly addressed, that is, the generation and certification of knowledge about social life orienting the making and remaking of socialist institutions.

To see why knowledge is central it is helpful to remember that as an utterly modernist phenomenon, the very success of socialism was predicated on the promise of its superior reflexivity. Socialism claimed better insights into the social and economic conditions of our time that were supposed to afford reliable guidance for political action resulting in a humane social order. However, as socialism was economically and technologically falling

ever more visibly behind its capitalist rival (something particularly obvious to East Germans), as socialism appeared ever less capable to manage its own affairs (palpable in persistent shortages and a crumbling infrastructure), the claims to superior insight lost their credibility at an accelerating pace during the 1980s. The unfulfilled promise to know better played a significant role in socialism's demise. Knowledge is important for my argument in yet another way. Individuals living within socialism—party functionaries included—were quite aware of the problems economic and political systems accounts of socialism's failure point to. Some of the very best analyses of systemic inadequacies were produced from within socialist officialdom—if in their mature version only at a distance from it.¹ And yet, typically, socialist officials could not do much with their locally produced insights. The institutional arrangements making up the party state systematically undercut both the deepening of locally produced knowledge and its systematic integration into an overarching analysis of socialism within a larger social world. Not that the party state did not possess a systematic understanding of itself. With what it called “Marxism-Leninism” it had a model of which it was only too sure, hastily condemning as puny, ungrateful, misguided, or even as inimical locally produced insights that questioned the central model. Accordingly, the issue at hand is to analyze how the party state failed to come to a genuinely *useful* understanding of itself at its center—one that would have enabled it to steer through its crisis more successfully. If we speak of reform failure in the context of socialism, therefore, we need to see it in light of socialism's political epistemics, the ways in which it produced and certified knowledge about itself. The move toward the epistemic in explanations of socialism's failure is, thus, not so much an attempt to direct our attention merely to a different area of social life as if the epistemic would be different from the economic or the political. Instead, I will undertake in this book a shift in perspective to the very principles underpinning the production and reproduction of social life. And there, I shall argue, the epistemic (in a wider discursive, emotive, and kinesthetic meaning) plays a central role. The account offered here is in this sense orthogonal to the two more established modes of explaining socialism's demise.

The shift in perspective to an analysis of processes of co-constitution between understandings and institutions entails changes in the general framework of how socialism is analyzed. The prevalent economic and po-

1. To name but the best known the list includes such illustrious contributions as (in order of the time of their original writing) Koestler 1968; Milosz 1990; Djilas 1983; Leonhard 1955; Havemann 1964; Voslensky 1984; Kolakowski 2008; Bahro 1977; Konrád and Szelényi 1979; Kornai 1992; Henrich 1989.

litical accounts are typically couched in the ancient language of comparative systems analysis, methodically juxtaposing encompassing forms of social order. With respect to the Soviet world this has always meant explicitly or implicitly playing off a liberal-democratic market economy against a state-socialist planned economy. A variant of systems analysis has identified socialism with fascism under the rubric of totalitarianism while again juxtaposing this supposedly new form to liberal-democratic market economies. I see especially two problems with this analytic procedure. On the one hand, it compares highly idealized images of these forms that are often inadequate to understand people's experiences on the ground. The history and the ethnography of everyday life as it emerged with regard to socialism since the 1980s has shown this time and again.² On the other hand, explaining the troubles of one form has in this tradition little direct bearing on the analysis of the other. Worse, since the forms are typically imagined as mutually exclusive alternatives, problems identified in one are read all too often as validating the other. In extreme cases, the comparison leads to self-congratulatory explanations that attribute the failure of one form to the fact that it was in relevant aspects not like the other. In this sense socialism is said to have failed because it was not a liberal democracy, not a market economy.

The analysis I am undertaking in this book is, by contrast, self-consciously lodged at the level of institution-forming process dynamics. Even if the ones I will foreground in this study were more central or widespread in socialism, they still may be found to have a significant place in many other institutional arrangements, which rarely are the logical, internally coherent worlds that comparative systems perspectives have imagined them to be. Instead, social arrangements are better understood as more or less well-integrated thickets of processes, a number of which are typically shared between what comparativists have juxtaposed as distinct systems. In fact, the reason why I found socialism such a fascinating subject of inquiry is precisely that it brings to the fore, perhaps more clearly, certain process dynamics that are more widely shared among contemporary, highly complex and heterogeneous institutional arrangements. Connected to this shift of emphasis from forms to process dynamics constituting these arrangements is the hope that it will enable us to learn from the experience of socialism. I am indeed hope-

2. Following the pioneering work of ethnographers exploring everyday life still *during* socialism especially in the Balkans (Verdery 1983 and 2003; Kligman 1988 and 1998; Szelenyi 1988; Burawoy and Lukacs 1992; Lampland 1995; Creed 1998) the better access to archives after the fall of socialism has allowed historians to make enormous progress in recovering the experience of everyday life under socialism (e.g., Kotkin 1995; Fitzpatrick 1999; Merkel 1999; Markovits 1995 and 2005; Fulbrook 2005; Hellbeck 2006).

ful that this book will afford its readers a fair number of déjà vu experiences, which may enable them to recognize social dynamics in their environment in the mirror of socialism.

Eastern European socialisms are a particularly rewarding subject for the exploration of the dynamic interplay between understandings and institutions. For one, socialism is now a clearly circumscribed historical epoch with a beginning and an end. Both bookends are clearly marked by the introduction and the dissolution, respectively, of a characteristic set of institutions. These, moreover, were rationally planned and legitimated on the basis of a sophisticated ideology, thus directly foregrounding the link under investigation here. Contrary to Marx's theory of how social formations come about in a naturalistic process of continuous transformations, Eastern Europe's socialisms were thoroughly intentional projects. They proceeded on the basis of Soviet blueprints. And in this sense, they were the result of politics in its purest form. The German Democratic Republic (also known by its acronym GDR or, more popularly, as East Germany) recommends itself among its brethren, because its complete dissolution as a state has created a rather unique research situation characterized by open archives and the accessibility of former state employees.

Both the theoretical and the historical lines of argument emerged from the investigation of one particular social arena: the efforts of the secret police of the GDR, the Stasi, to control the peace and civil rights movements in East Berlin during the last decade of the country's existence. Spelling it out with such brevity may immediately raise the question, how one could aspire to make arguments as encompassing as the ones just set forth from such a limited domain of social interaction. No doubt, such a move involves a certain conceit, albeit, I hope, a productive one. In its defense I should point out that I did not start this project with an agenda quite as broadly scoped. Instead, I began research in 2001 with the question, how dictatorial political regimes draw and maintain the support of wider strata of the population. Modern states are highly complex institutional arrangements that cannot operate properly without such support. Furthermore, I was interested in how the exercise of dictatorial state power influences state agents' understandings of their own work within a larger political context. And what would be better as a research site for such questions, I thought, than to focus on those members of the Stasi who had actively participated in suppressing dissident activities. After all, the Stasi archives were at least in principle open, and the officers could potentially be interviewed. These more limited questions have not disappeared from this book, but they have become embedded in the wider framework just outlined, as I woke up to what appeared to me as the sociological potential of this particular research "site." It quickly dawned on me that what was at stake in both the efforts of the Stasi officers as they and the party state saw it and in

the emerging opposition's efforts to create what they called a "parallel society" was nothing less than the understandings of socialism in its particular institutional form at a particular moment in time and the feedback of these understandings on socialism's institutional fabric. That question was only highlighted by socialism's demise, in which both the Stasi and the opposition played a much more passive role than one might have thought. Of course, the fact remains that I *am* deriving my argument from the investigation of one particular social arena, while generalizing it to GDR socialism as a whole and even with hopes of applicability to Eastern European socialisms more generally. My readings about the social life in other politicized domains of social life in the GDR (both primary and secondary) give me the confidence that this move has merit. This interpretation is further plausibilized by the highly centralized character of socialist governance that, tolerance for some local variations notwithstanding, asserted certain principles across domains of interaction (and the more politically relevant they were deemed to be the more so). Where the boundaries of the usefulness of my argument lie in the end can—given the detail knowledge required—only be ascertained in a wider discussion of comparisons that no scholar can produce alone.

Five Intertwined Empirical Perspectives on Understandings and Institutions

Throughout the research and writing process for this book, the historical and the theoretical lines of argument were developed together, moving constantly from one to the other. Thus theory became a method of fact finding and fact integration for the development of a historical narrative; narration in turn became the testing ground for theory, revealing gaps and overzealous reductions. This generative movement between theoretization and narration was further fueled by the fact that the social arena under consideration here, the Stasi's efforts to control the opposition in the GDR, could be seen as closely intertwining five different perspectives, each raising the question of understandings and institutions from a different angle and yet in complementary ways. These five perspectives lend structure to the book. From the first perspective (part I of the book), I inquire how the ruling party in East Germany thought about and set to work on developing and maintaining a socialist order. The first chapter spans a wide historical arch, wondering how the adherence to ideology (after all, largely an epiphenomenon for Marx) could come to be considered a, if not *the*, linchpin of the party state. I will show that anxious about the "unity and purity" of its ideology, the party aimed at engineering a monolithic intentionality that would bring about socialism in what can analytically only be understood as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Given this exalted role of ideology, this chapter also asks

how the party determined the correct interpretation of Marxism-Leninism for a given historical situation. The second chapter follows suit by raising the question, how the party went about its proselytizing business. I will discuss both the positive (persuading) and the negative (restricting) side of this missionary effort. The first was instituted as a giant propaganda apparatus aiming to form socialist human beings. But what if these efforts failed to bear the fruit the state desired? I will show in this chapter that propaganda failure was one of the key domains of the secret police. I will emphasize that propaganda and secret police work were but two sides of the same coin.

The second perspective on the relationship between understandings and political institutions is provided by what one might want to call the epistemic careers of the Stasi officers. Chapter 5, the first in part III of the book, follows the officers on their path from childhood experiences to their employment by the Stasi to learn how their initial attunement to socialism came about. It also investigates how their understandings were shaped subsequently by different kinds of work experiences, marking different phases in the historical development of the GDR. By necessity this involves an inquiry into how particular historical events such as the building of the Wall in 1961 and the Warsaw Pact's smothering of the Prague Spring in 1968 has shaped their views of socialism and their role in it. Chapter 6 complements this picture by inquiring about the discursive culture of the Stasi with a particular emphasis on three questions. How did employees acquire authority in a state socialist bureaucracy? How did the networks of authorized others develop for Stasi officers in the course of time? And what could they talk about, with whom, in what terms about matters political?

The third perspective is provided by the development of the political understandings of peace and civil rights movement activists—the topic of part IV of the book. Chapter 7 traces their biographical trajectory from the emergence of government critical feelings and thoughts to their integration into a protest milieu. Chapter 8 continues this trajectory into the formation of a veritable—if small—parallel civil society from the foundation of politically active groups and countrywide networks of activists to the publication of nationally circulated samizdat. One emphasis of these two chapters lies, as in the case of the Stasi officers, in the *development* of political understandings as the result of a sequence of events. Another is the importance of emotions and the sensuous experience of moving bodies through concrete spaces for the development of political understandings. A perhaps surprising insight of these two chapters concerns the epistemic importance of intimate relationships. We shall see in these chapters, perhaps even more clearly than in the chapters on the Stasi officers, that spatial arrangements, the co-location of people and their interweaving through meeting spots can have profound epistemic consequences.

The fourth perspective is given by the very techniques the party state employed to induce men and women with government critical ideas to reverse their opinions or at least to abstain from further government critical action. What is interesting about these techniques is that they too were aimed at the formation of understandings of self and other. That does not mean that these techniques were in any way less violent. Systematic disinformation was used to disorient people and to destroy personal relationships. And yet, the success of these techniques was rather variable; and precisely this fact is theoretically interesting. It raises the question, under what conditions particular techniques of manipulating people's understandings work, or fail to work. This will also shed further light on the epistemic qualities of intimate relations.

The fifth and final perspective (conclusion) zeros in on the question, why the socialist project failed. Why did the call for reforms in the hot fall of 1989 not end like the Prague Spring in 1968, or the Hungarian uprising in 1956, or the East German protests of 1953, that is, in armed intervention on behalf of the existing order? Put differently, why did the secret police officers, who had sworn to defend socialism to the last drop of their blood, not even fire a single shot in its defense when its very existence came under threat? As the answer to the last question will be found in an increasing disorientation of party state functionaries caused by an accelerating discrepancy between lived experience and official party descriptions of life in the GDR, the central question becomes why the party state was unable to develop more successful action guiding understandings of itself in a wider social world.

The perspective that is most obviously missing is that of what one might want to call "common people," that is, GDR citizens who were neither seriously committed to socialism nor directly opposed to it. This seems problematic because in the fall of 1989 common people become important historical actors both in fueling a new refugee wave and in taking to the streets lending force to the groundswell of demonstrations. The reasons for this omission are mostly practical and therefore I do not want to make an attempt to justify it intellectually. Nevertheless, from all I know about my readings on everyday life in the GDR, the dynamics I am describing in this book about the development of understandings among Stasi officers and dissidents are those of common people too, albeit in different admixtures, differently distributed across time. Moreover, their action, and their performed understandings are present indirectly through the reactions of officers and dissidents. This is not ideal, but I think it is workable.

Hermeneutic Institutionalism

The details of the theoretical model as I will develop them in the introductory chapter as well as in the two chapters of part II of the book is the result of

a careful comparison between these perspectives. And yet, the fundamental analytical framework of this study stands in a long tradition of hermeneutic social thought dating back to the eighteenth-century writings of Vico (1968; 1988) and Herder (1953; 2002). It found its way into the germinating social sciences in Germany via scholars such as Dilthey (1970), Weber (1980), and Simmel (1992), but also, mediated by Hegel, through the works of American pragmatists (e.g., Dewey 1925; 1997). Max Weber (1980) even qualified his own way of practicing sociology as “hermeneutic” (*verstehend*, literally: “understanding”). The hallmark of hermeneutic social thought is not only (as often foregrounded) the employment of interpretative techniques as a primary research method. Even more important is the prominence it affords to interpretation and communication as the central linchpin of human social life. Says Vico, this being a version of his famous “*verum factum* principle” (1968, 96), “the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind.” With “civil society” Vico means our social institutions. What he calls here “modifications of mind” is further analyzed by him as a thoroughly social and historical process of forming understandings about the world. If this is so, then understanding is also the method of choice to study processes of institution-formation because the ways in which we understand the social world is constitutive of the institutional arrangements in and through which we live. Our understandings shape our actions while our actions in concatenation with those of others call into being, maintain, and transform institutions. In practice this means, for example, that the ways in which we think, talk, feel, and habitually comport ourselves with respect to the law, the government, parties, elections, the mass media, nongovernmental organizations, constitutes them as the institutions that make up our political order. If this holds, then studying the transformation of understandings should be an apposite way of investigating the transformation of political institutions, including revolutions.

Given our currently prevalent social imaginaries, the links this framework establishes between understandings, actions, and institutions appear far too neat, however. We are only too well aware of the difficulties involved in changing established institutions even when their detrimental effects are well known and seemingly universally decried. We seem to understand what’s wrong, and yet nothing happens. Alluding merely to power differentials in sorting out whose understandings do and whose do not matter is no solution here. Indeed, we find it obvious today that the institutional order in which we live conforms to nobody’s understandings in particular. People who still believe in the powers of a social demiurge (and be it a secular one such as a class or a ruling elite), whose intentions we would only need to decipher to unravel the mysteries of society, would inevitably appear as naive conspiracy