

THE HISTORICAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF
COMMUNIST DECLINE*

IN THIS LENGTHY study of the political culture of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) and its role in the demise of state socialism, Andreas Glaeser endeavors to reconstruct the mentalities and modes of understanding that informed both its most ardent defenders and most committed critics. Glaeser's book joins the already large literature which attempts to puzzle out the GDR's apparent long-term stability in light of its sudden collapse. Glaeser's new take on the problem relies on revealing the political epistemology that was encoded in the construction and reproduction of socialist institutions. The study, which is really two good-sized books in one, addresses its question first through the development of a sociology of political meaning and meaning-making practices that is inspired by the "cultural turn" in historical sociology and, second, through a penetrating study of the secret police (the feared "Stasi") and the nascent civic movement of the 1980s.

Although it may be seen as a contribution to the history of ideas, I found the first part of the study, which attempts to define a new method of ethnographically-informed theorizing, ponderous and of little practical importance for sociologists. The latter portion of the book, on the other hand, which is based on in-depth interviews with former Stasi officers and members of the East Berlin dissident scene supplemented with archival research, provides a fascinating portrait of the GDR in decay. We learn much about how Marxism-Leninism was understood and applied by agents of the state and how it became enshrined in East German socialism such that its agents became trapped by ideological inflexibility and institutional rigidity. As a result, the party-state became powerless to stop a yawning chasm between official understandings and lived realities. In time, the effectiveness of social control eroded and self-corrective policies became impossible to institute even by those agents of the state that were the most loyal, resourceful, and best informed.

* About Andreas GLAESER, *Political Epistemics: The Secret Police, the Opposition, and the End of East German Socialism* (Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Drawing on interviews and historical source materials, Glaeser's parallel study of Stasi officers and their dissident others shows how education, recruitment and experiences shaped both groups' understanding of politics and the nature of the crisis confronting the GDR. One of the most interesting questions Glaeser explores is why the ideologically inspired, compliant and highly-professionalized state security forces proved unwilling or unable to shed blood to defend the socialist regime in the fall of 1989. Glaeser's interviews with former Stasi officers suggest that it was not simply a matter of faltering Soviet support but rather that these vital state agents were unable to overcome the dissonance caused by the growing gap between their ideological understanding of the world and their everyday experience of socialism's inadequate performance and the popular contempt for the regime and its putative achievements that engendered. This cognitive crisis manifested itself not in defection to the opposition, but in a paralyzing disorientation that unmanned what should have been the state's willing executioners.

Glaeser's account expends enormous effort to reconstruct the understandings and political lifeworlds of the GDR's police officers and dissidents. It says almost nothing about the vast bulk of East Germans who were implicated neither in the defense of the regime nor in the isolating and dangerous business of criticizing it. Despite his focus on elites, Glaeser weakly asserts that the mentalities he has reconstructed apply in varying degrees to the broader population that he has not studied but which shared the same political culture. Given what we know from the extensive historiography of East Germany, this is a dubious assertion. Yet the issue speaks to a bigger problem. For all the book's efforts to critique conventional social science, the empirical study that follows has methodological shortcomings. The empirical heart of the book is 25 interviews conducted with former Stasi officers and 12 interviews with former dissidents who were contacted on the basis of their post-unification involvement in organizations aimed at memorializing or reassessing the history of the GDR. The interviews were conducted in 2001 – more than a decade after the ignominious collapse of the communist regime – yet too little attention is given to the well-known biases that attend self-selection and retrospective interviewing. Glaeser prompted his subjects with archival documents and encouraged them to prepare for their interviews using materials of their own. He calls the method “historical ethnography” but this leaves one wondering how this method differs from the established historical method of oral history (and the techniques used by oral historians to ensure validity) and whether ethnography can properly be

applied in historical settings. If so, under what conditions? Are living subjects required – could someone perform a historical ethnography of the US Civil War, for instance? Every method has its limits, it is true, and yet it is also true that otherwise valid methods may strain when made to stretch too far.

Whatever the frustrations and limits one encounters in *Political Epistemics*, Glaeser brings originality and insight to the historical study of meaning and mentalities. The contributions to our understanding of the demise of the GDR and interdisciplinary German studies are substantial.

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