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The East German Secret Service (Stasi) and its Operationalisation of Cold War Conspiracy Theories

Abstract

In westlichen Demokratien werden Verschwörungstheorien in der Regel mit Randgruppen in Verbindung gebracht, in autoritären Regimes dagegen werden sie als offizielle Wahrheiten, sprich als Propaganda oder Desinformation verbreitet. Im Kalten Krieg war diese Unterscheidung für die Behandlung von mutmaßlichen Systemgegnern entscheidend. Im Ostblock wähnten die kommunistischen Geheimdienste nahezu eine Blankovollmacht zu haben, interne politische Gegner als Verschwörer und Staatsfeinde zu verfolgen. Als das ›Schild und Schwert‹ der SED witterte beispielsweise die ostdeutsche Staatssicherheit (Stasi) überall Verschwörer, selbst unter ansonsten loyalen Schriftstellern. Ausgiebig erforscht ist bereits die Rolle von Inoffiziellen Mitarbeitern (IMs) bei der Verfolgung von Kulturproduzenten (vgl. Walther), wobei unklar ist, inwieweit die Stasi bei ihrem Informanten-Netzwerk Verschwörungstheorien evozierte und einsetzte. In diesem Beitrag wird unter Heranziehung der Berichte von Stasi-Informanten aus dem Stasi-Unterlagenarchiv der DDR der Frage nachgegangen, ob und wie die herrschenden Verschwörungstheorien über sogenannte Staatsfeinde, ›antisozialistische‹ Gruppen und ›konterrevolutionäre‹ Plattformen innerhalb des Sicherheitsapparats operationalisiert wurden. Anhand der Akten aus dem *Sicherungsbereich Literatur* (vgl. Walther) wird gezeigt, dass selbst geheime Literaturgutachten, die die Stasi in ihrer inoffiziellen Funktion als Zensor in Auftrag gab, Verschwörungstheorien in allen Schattierungen verbreitete. Diese Vorstellungen vermischten sich mit pejorativen literaturwissenschaftlichen Kategorien, die aus den Schriften des ungarischen Literaturkritikers Georg Lukács und der Expressionismusdebatte der Dreißigerjahre gespeist wurden.

Schlüsselbegriffe

Verschwörungstheorien, autoritäre Regimes, Ostblockgeheimdienste, Stasi-Informanten, der Kalte Krieg, Literatur der DDR, Uwe Burger

Keywords
conspiracy theories, authoritarian regimes, Eastern bloc secret services, Stasi informants, Cold War, GDR literature, Uwe Burger

I. Introduction

Conspiracy theories in contemporary western democracies are generally associated with fringe politics or marginal groups (cf. Barkun, 2) while in authoritarian societies they are peddled as official truths (cf. Giry/Gürpínar, 320). During the Cold War this was certainly true of Eastern bloc communist regimes who used ideologically-driven, top-down conspiracy theories as propaganda. Such conspiracy theories about external and internal enemies were most pernicious during the Stalinist era but they continued well into the post-Stalinist period. Moreover, conspiracy theories continued to inform the work of infamous Soviet-style secret services such as the KGB and the East German Stasi, or Ministry for State Security (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit). While it is well known that the first generation of Stasi officers adopted a Stalinist habitus and ›image of the enemy‹ *(Feindbild)* (cf. Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter*, 201), it is not clear how entrenched these stereotypes were and how conspiratorial explanations relating to putative ›enemies of the people‹ played out in the Stasi's undercover work. Did for instance the Stasi's vast network of informers, who were instrumentalised as »the main weapon in the fight against the enemy« (Gieseke, *The History of the Stasi*, 79) but often recruited by force, buy into their officers' views about anti-socialist plotters and counter-revolutionaries? Did conspiratorial thinking also permeate the cultural sphere and what form did it take? To offer some answers to these questions, I propose enlisting the vast archive of Stasi documents as a rich repository of the belief systems of informers. Reading these archives in tandem with recent scholarship on conspiracy theories I hypothesise that conspiracy thinking was certainly rife among the Stasi's informers. While only a quantitative study can elucidate how rife it was, a deep dive into the file of one notorious example of an influential Stasi informer can reveal how conspiratorial rhetoric underpinned Stasi operations and help to elucidate its importance in surveillance. My case pertains to the writer Uwe Berger, whose Stasi files have been comprehensively explored elsewhere (cf. Lewis, »The Stasi's Secret War on Books«, 99-134), and is taken from the »security domain« of literature and culture (cf. Walther).

II. Conspiracy theories in authoritarian regimes and Eastern bloc intelligence services

Michael Barkun defines a »conspiracy belief« as the idea »that an organisation made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent ends« (Barkun, 3). This organisation is generally seen to hold immense power, even though its activities are secret (cf. Butter/Knight, 3). The susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs is frequently associated with paranoia, either as an individual trait or as a shared feature of a group (3). Paranoia, or what Richard Hofstadter famously called a »paranoid style« (Hofstadter, 4), can be a useful tool to explicate the enduring appeal of conspiracy thinking.

Cold War Eastern bloc regimes were quick to leap to conspiratorial explanations for unwanted events and human behaviour, most of which would barely raise an eyebrow in the West. While never using the term ›conspiracy theory‹, and after 1957 rarely referring directly to enemies as conspirators *(Verschwörer)*, communist regimes nevertheless actively propagated conspiracy theories about the threat of ›enemies of the people‹ as official truths. Furthermore, they policed these enemies through powerful secret police forces who operated as the communist party's ›Schild und Schwert‹. Stalinist show trials for instance were the most visible part of the regime's hunting down of so-called conspirators, but in the post-Stalinist era Soviet-style state security apparatuses had increasingly a wide-range of instruments at their disposal to deter potential plotters against the regime.

Julien Giry and Doğan Gürpínar argue that authoritarian regimes deploy conspiracy theories regularly as a »way of mobilising masses, reinforcing incumbent power structures, and assuring loyalty of people« (Giry/Gürpínar, 318). They also use them frequently in times of crisis to reassert the authority of the party and to garner popular support (cf. 318). The East German show trials of the Harich-Janka groups are a good case in point which served an important performative function to stigmatise reformist intellectuals in the eyes of the people. Karl Popper once argued with these Stalinist show trials in mind that Marxism had a predilection for conspiracism (cf. 317). But for Popper the problem lay not so much with Marx who, he argued, correctly served to dispel the capitalist conspiracy – the myth that the world was being controlled by a cabal of capitalists – and put it on a scientific footing. The problem stemmed rather from the distortion of Marxist ideals by the phenomenon he called »Stalinist

satanism« (Popper, 367): »Appealing to the belief in human freedom, it has produced a system of oppression without parallel in history« (367).
For Giry and Gürpínar authoritarianism has a predilection for the sort of thinking we see in conspiracy theories of all stripes, namely that of complexity reduction and rigidity: »Authoritarian ideologies are characterized by an unshakable belief in their righteousness and a tendency to provide comprehensive explanations for complex events, which renders them prone to conspiracy theories« (Giry/Gürpínar, 317). Such ideologies are characterised by a Manichean dualism, a strict sorting of citizens into an in- and out-group, a them and us (cf. 318; Barkun, 2). Conspiracies affirm the values of the in-group by demonising an all-powerful out-group who is plotting to overthrow the in-group. Interestingly, in the 19th century some historians, for instance, of the French Revolution, promoted conspiracist interpretations of history as historical fact (cf. Butter/Knight, 29). The best-known example of this is Augustin Barruel who blamed the Freemasons and the Illuminati for the French Revolution (cf. 29). While conspiracy theories are now rejected by historians as a »legitimate form of knowledge« (29), it is not always obvious if a conspiracy theory is true until the evidence has been properly scrutinised. Only then can what were hitherto mere suspicions become legitimate knowledge or fact – as for instance was the case with Watergate (cf. van Prooijen/Klein/Đorđević, 169; cf. Keeley, 414).
In such a climate of acute paranoia, and when the threat of a conspiracy is real, it is easy to see how conspiracy thinking can become rife as it was for the communist regimes of the Eastern bloc. As Barkun argues, »[c]onspiracism explains failure, both for organizations and for the larger world« (Barkun, 3). This was the case in the Soviet bloc where conspiracism helped to explain the failings of monopoly socialism and the command economies of the region to their populations.
Even since the French Revolution, revolutions have spawned their opposite in the counter-revolution that threatens to roll back the revolution. The Jacobins blamed resistance to their revolution on the plots of counter-revolutionaries; counter-revolutionaries in turn used conspiracy explanations to account for revolutionary events (cf. Giry/Gürpínar, 319). Revolutionary regimes rely accordingly on »the revolutionary conspiratorial narrative« whereas regimes »built on counter-revolutionary scripts […] reproduce[] the counterrevolutionary account« (319). Furthermore, both left-wing and right-wing dictatorships reproduce conspiratorial narratives (cf. 319). Although the fear of the counter-revolution is not always a »mere

phantasm« (319), as argued above, in the GDR it mostly was. Moreover, unlike other Eastern bloc countries, very few dissidents in East Germany saw themselves as anti-socialist and most wanted to reform the system not abolish it. However, history of the Cold War has shown how these phantasms of persecution could easily morph into exaggerated and overblown fears of opposition, leading to baseless, all-consuming paranoia directed at innocent targets. It is striking how Soviet propaganda under Stalin »constantly talked about ›wreckers‹, spies, and ›saboteurs‹ supposedly sent to the USSR from a hostile capitalist environment«, as Kirziuk writes (Kirziuk, 68). Even in the late Soviet period, when enemy influence became more subtle and psychological, the line remained the same that the West was »seeking to defeat the USSR through psychological warfare« (68).

In the following I adopt the view that intelligence activity on both sides of the Cold War did indeed involve undermining, infiltrating and conspiring against the ideological enemy, and that these battles took many different forms. It is undoubtedly true that the West tried to infiltrate the Soviet bloc and vice-versa with sleepers, moles and agents. It is also true that the history of the Eastern bloc is punctuated by actual conspiracies to topple the prevailing communist regimes. The uprising of the 17th June 1953 in the German Democratic Republic is one such event, which was the last of its kind until 1989. In the rest of the Soviet sphere, however, anti-Soviet plots were far more common. In 1956 in Hungary and Poland, for instance, reformers ›conspired‹ against governments of the day, in 1968 in Prag and in 1980 in Poland. In most cases the uprisings were crushed by the Soviets or the threat of major insurrection was suppressed by other means.

The existence of actual conspiracies does not mean, however, that conspiratorial thinking is necessarily always reasonable. During the Cold War the fear of conspiracies flourished well beyond the spheres in which it was warranted, and conspiratorial explanations proffered when there were far more banal and plausible explanations for individuals' behaviour. In the Eastern bloc in particular, the occurrence of plots to bring down communist regimes or to challenge their leadership bred a climate of excessive suspicion. It was among those ruling elites, rather in fringe or marginal groups, that the fear of a conspiracy was most acute and the boundary between real conspiracies and imagined ones became blurred. The distinction between warranted und unwarranted suspicions of conspiracies, as difficult as it may be to pin down, is generally seen in the philosophical

debates to be the crucial distinction between an actual conspiracy and a conspiracy theory, as Brian Keeley argues (Keeley, 414).
In a further distinction between western democracies and authoritarian regimes, I would argue that it was in the Eastern bloc that the secret services were given carte blanche to target opponents as potential plotters against the regime, and that invasive surveillance practices were able to flourish largely unchecked by the rule of law.

III. Conspiracy theories about dissenters and Stasi informants

In a recent article devoted to the logic underpinning the KGB's persecution of Soviet dissidents, Anna Kirziuk reveals that conspiracy narratives about powerful western forces like the CIA, who were trying to harm the USSR, underpinned Soviet media campaigns. The most prevalent narratives related to the West allegedly using dissidents as puppets. Dissidents were »persistently accused of being associated with Western intelligence services and portrayed as obedient puppets of ›their foreign masters‹« (Kirziuk, 67). These conspiracy theories were not only part of public discourse, they were also an intrinsic part of secret communication between the communist party and the KGB. Kirziuk asks if the main purpose of these conspiracy tropes was to discredit dissidents publicly, why then was an »anti-Western conspiracy theory« (68) needed in classified documents? The easy answer is, of course, that they were part of a conventionalised specialist language. Yet this does not account for their ubiquitousness in secret documents. Kirziuk contends that conspiracy theories served an important internal function for the Soviet regime by shifting blame, not only from the regime's failings but also from the public and its citizens. In shifting the blame citizens were thus deprived of agency. All these factors helped to bolster self-esteem of the regime and avoid loss of face, or as Kirziuk states:

> By attributing [failings] to the subversive activities of conspirators, leaders and ordinary people could give an explanation of reality that would not challenge their belief in the rightness of the regime. In other words, the conspiracy theories under Stalin helped Soviet people connect reality with their political belief in a consistent way. They protected their consistent worldview from destruction (78).

In the following case study I test Kirziuk's hypothesis by applying it to the Soviet Union's most powerful ally and satellite state, the German

Democratic Republic. More specifically I am interested in how the Stasi's eyes and ears – its army of informers – interpreted and reproduced the dominant official theories of western forces conspiring against the regime in their operational work. Did they believe in the official conspiracy theories as well? Did they internalise official propaganda about enemy influence and if so fully or only partially? Did they reference the prevailing conspiracy theories of their Stasi handlers in their accounts or did they resist the Stasi's desire to see enemies everywhere? Finally, I explore through a case study of an informer how the political and security apparatuses of the GDR framed the writings of authors of creative fiction, poetry or theatre as the intentional political actions of a conspirer against the regime. In the process literature stood accused of launching a conspiracy to overthrow communism.

My case study pertaining to Stasi informant and writer Uwe Berger is taken from the period after Erich Honecker succeeded Walter Ulbricht as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party and Head of the State Council in 1971. The Stasi's new campaign against dissenters that it called the fight against »politisch-ideologische Diversion« increasingly had intellectuals and writers in its crosshairs.[1] With the aid of this new concept the Stasi embarked on a mass surveillance program in which it spotted potential enemies almost everywhere in the population. Ordinary people with western relatives could be potential conspirators of western imperialism; teachers, intellectuals, journalists, writers, editors and scientists were suspect but also anyone wearing jeans and parkas and listening to western music (cf. Horten, 129f.).

In the sixties the Stasi had already begun to intensify its surveillance of official cultural circles such as the German Writers Guild *(Deutscher Schrift-*

1 What in the late fifties was called the fight against »political revisionism« was expanded in the sixties into a new strategy: that of combatting »political-ideological diversion« (Engelmann, 66f.; Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter*, 229; see Gieseke, *The History of the Stasi*, 52). In 1960 the slightly modified term »political-ideological diversion« took hold in the MfS, as an internal document from 3 February 1960 titled ›Directive to improve counter-intelligence work with political-ideological diversion and underground activity‹ indicates. It now appears the term was in use almost a year earlier than previously thought by Engelmann and Schumann, who in 1995 dated its probable use to November 1960 (Engelmann/Schumann, 354); see »Direktive zur Verbesserung der Abwehrarbeit gegen die politisch-ideologische Diversion und Untergrundtätigkeit« (Engelmann/Joestel, *Grundsatzdokumente*, 126-128). As Engelmann and Joestel write, the MfS transitioned via the term into an ideological police force (cf. Engelmann/Joestel, *Die Hauptabteilung IX*, 86).

stellerverband) for signs of deviance and non-orthodox political views. Berger was a member of the guild and the SED and thus deemed to be »geeignet für die politisch operative Abwehrarbeit unter den Schriftstellern und Lyrikern. […] Der Kandidat ist selbst Lyriker und Literaturkritiker und besitzt unter genannten [sic] Personenkreis umfangreiche Verbindungen« (*B* 1, 5).[2] He was enlisted in 1969, and an informer file *IM-Vorgang* was opened on him on 25 November 1969 (cf. *B* 1, 5). Berger chose the undercover name ›Uwe‹.

Berger was one of the most productive and eager informants among writers, and his file contains 2,255 pages (cf. Walther, 312). He was meant to be another of the ministry's men inside the guild, providing intelligence on members' works and activities. The Stasi had positioned other informants in these circles: from 1962 to 1967 it had a key inside source in informant GI (Geheimer Informator) ›Dichter‹ in Paul Wiens and GI ›Martin‹ alias Hermann Kant, the president of the guild from 1978 to 1989 (cf. Halverson, 1). In fact, there were so many informants in the guild that this led to the absurd situation that the informers caused frictions and divisions amongst themselves. As Joachim Walther writes: »Missgunst war selbst innerhalb der Gilde der Schriftsteller-IM verbreitet« (Walther, 519). The broader context for Berger's recruitment was the fear that there were hostile tendencies emerging among writers in official positions who were growing more outspoken about their dissatisfaction with cultural policy.

IV. Co-opting Stasi informers for reviews: Enter ›Uwe‹ alias Uwe Berger

After the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968, intellectuals began to push for reforms and a relaxation of censorship, eventually capitalising on the short-lived period of liberalisation after Erich Honecker's famous ›there shall be no taboos‹ speech in 1971. The Stasi issued new guidelines for working with informants in 1968, which were in response to the changed security situation after the building of the Wall in 1961. The main target of security efforts was no longer the threat stemming from »Anschläge[n] der Geheimdienste, Agentenzentralen und anderer Zentren,

2 All quotations from Berger's Stasi file are cited from here on with the siglum (*B*) and a page number, cf: BArch [German Federal Archives], StU [Stasi Records Archive], MfS [Ministry for State Security], file A 131/76, 6 vols.

Dienststellen und Konzerne der kapitalistischen Staaten« (Müller-Enbergs, 196) as outlined in the 1958 guidelines. Since the Wall now made access to the GDR for foreign agents less straightforward, the Stasi focused its attention instead on preventing the spread of the West's hostile ›revanchist politics‹ and in detecting »die Zentren und Hintermänner dieser Politik« (246). Informants were needed more than ever before to protect the »sozialistischen Aufbau« and to expose the »Pläne und Absichten der aggressiven imperialistischen Mächte, besonders der USA und Westdeutschlands« (242).

Intellectuals, in particular writers, increasingly came under suspicion of being the bearers of these revanchist ideas and harbouring key links to the shadowy »Hintermänner« pulling the strings on behalf of these nebulous »centres« of imperialist power. With the growing emphasis on consolidating socialist society, after 1961 intellectuals became the bugbear of the regime and a group that national security was intent on controlling. To this end, informants were needed inside these circles to alert the Stasi to potential foreign influences among writers. Berger was tasked with keeping an eye on several of the writers: Günter Kunert and Paul Wiens as well as Günter Caspar. One of his first missions was to try to befriend Wiens.[3]

Uwe Berger is described aptly as a »cunning opportunist motived more by careerism than ideology« (Zipser, »Corrupt GDR Writers«) by one of his victims, US academic Richard Zipser. This is borne out by Berger's copious reports for the Stasi. His handwritten documents – which total 432 in number – are distinguished on the whole by their hardline stance (cf. Walther, 312). This is clearly in evidence in the classified reviews of manuscripts the Stasi commissioned Berger to write outside the official censorship process. The Stasi could become involved behind the scenes in censorship, providing a third review in addition to the two reviews normally submitted to the censors, the Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel (cf. Müller, 312f.). For these services Berger was paid in the range of 200 and 400 East German Marks and in 1982 he was rewarded for his services with the *Medaille für Waffenbrüderschaft in Silber* (cf. *B* 6, 211).

3 Wiens had ironically worked for the Stasi himself for a period in the sixties before falling out of favour and coming under surveillance. It seems Berger was enlisted partly to replace Wiens but also to gather more intelligence on the latter's state of mind in a case of »spy versus spy« (cf. Lewis, *A State of Secrecy*, 73-79).

Berger leaves nothing to chance in the assessments of literary works that he regularly penned for his handler Oberleutnant Rolf Pönig. This was not because Pönig did not understand subtlety or because Berger merely wanted to repeat back to Pönig what his officer wanted to hear. From archival evidence we now know that other informers did not use such polarising rhetoric even with their handlers. Sascha Anderson, whom Pönig also ran as an informant, and Maja Wiens, Paul Wiens' daughter, sometimes tried to play down the hostile intentions of their targets (cf. Lewis, *A State of Secrecy*, 148-153; 159-162). For this reason, Berger's reports are intriguing, not least because they reveal the extent to which Berger was influenced by official suspicions about writers supposedly plotting against the regime. It is fair to say that Berger's embellishment and exaggeration of these suspicions went far beyond the call of duty.

The first example we have on file of a meeting report between Berger and Pönig dates from 11 March 1970. The meeting took place unusually in Berger's own apartment. A number of conspiracy narratives of varying intensity and seriousness about writers inform Berger's reviews. Before examining the most dominant of these narratives it is worth mentioning the few exceptions in the files that do not warrant classifying as conspiracy theories. One of his first reviews is of Paul Wiens' poetry cycle about Lenin titled *Weltbilder* (1970). Berger's argument is that Wiens is propagating »ein widersprüchliches Lenin-Bild« (*B* 1, 42). Berger concludes that Wiens was taking the position of »de[r] subjektiven Idealisten« (*B* 1, 42) once critiqued by Lenin. In doing so, Berger surmises that Wiens was inspired by modern revisionists such as the French philosopher Roger Garaudy. Moreover, Berger concludes that Wiens' views presented »Berührungspunkte mit anarchischen Auffassungen« (*B* 1, 43), noting for good measure that anarchism was a »kleinbürgerliche geistige Strömung« (*B* 1, 43). While the reference to anarchism is tendentious, the claim that Wiens was advocating a revisionist line does not stray into the realm of conspiracy theories and is entirely plausible. This was not the case with most of his other reviews.

V. »Hassvolle Angriffe gegen die DDR«: Berger's conspiratorial arguments

With few exceptions Berger's reviews offer scathing treatments of his colleagues' works. Significantly, his arguments rely heavily on prevailing

conspiracy theories. The most striking ones we find are where the author is accused of hostile intentions and of launching attacks against socialism. Belying these damning assessments of literature is the implication that these attacks are not merely textual or literary but entail ›real‹ attacks of a more serious and substantial nature. The plotting was directed either at the SED, socialism more generally or the socialist way of life and the whole Eastern bloc. As I will show, Berger reproduced the party line that all too often interpreted criticism of socialist society as a direct, hostile attack on the party. Official rhetoric then typically made the paranoid conclusion that the author of such hostile attacks was not acting alone and was already part of, or soon to become part of a conspiracy. But did informants who lived cheek by jowl with their targets and were writers themselves implicitly believe these conspiracy theories? How far were they willing to go to flesh out official rhetoric and implicate their fellow writers?

In a review Berger was commissioned to write about a collection of poems and short stories by Günter Kunert in May 1970. Berger accuses Kunert of invoking Kafka in the story »Unsichtbarsein«. Kafka belonged to the modernist tradition rejected by socialist cultural policy makers, who took their cues from Georg Lukács' critique of expressionism and documentary realism for not being dialectical enough (cf. Lukács, »Willi Bredel«, 16). It is telling that Berger evokes this critique and complains that Kunert proceeds undialectically, isolating the appearance of reality from its essence (cf. *B* 1, 35). Kunert was, Berger implies, a seasoned agitator. This was »eine bewußt gegen den Sozialismus, seine Streitkräfte und Machtorgane eingesetzte Schreibweise« and written in a »verallgemeinernde, den Autor tarnende ›Sklavensprache‹« (*B* 1, 35).

Kunert's anti-socialist writing was intentional rather than accidental and, to make matters worse, it appeared to be part of the systematic cultivation of a language of deception – the ›speech of slaves‹ *(Sklavensprache)*. This was the term invented by critic Hans Mayer to describe the »coded vocabulary of resistance to authority which sounds like obedience« we see used by Brecht's characters (cf. Thomson/Sacks, 73). Here we see it invoked to extend the reach of Berger's rhetoric into conspiratorial territory. Kunert's writing was not only hostile to the government and its party, it was secretively and deceptively so. At the end of his review Berger repeats the claim that the works in question were revisionist, and that they were directed against socialism: the poems were conceived »im revisionistischen Geist gegen den Sozialismus« (*B* 1, 41).

Berger's later reviews are characterised by an intensification of this line of argument, which he rehearses in different variations. In 1977 Berger was commissioned to write another review, this time of Kunert's poetry volume *Unterwegs nach Utopia*, which had been published by Hanser Verlag in the West. Again, Berger had little to recommend the work. He claims one third contained »haßvolle Angriffe gegen die DDR, den realen Sozialismus, die Partei- und Staatsführung sowie Aufforderungen zu ideologischer Diversion« (*B 5*, 15). Here the alleged attacks are depicted as having concrete targets ranging from the GDR (which is being defamed: *B 5*, 15), the party and its political apparatuses (such as the army and state security: *B 5*, 15), and individual leaders (*B 5*, 16). Berger backs up each instance of an attack with a quotation and a page reference to underscore the so-called objective, expert character of his review. Furthermore, Berger tries to quantify the hostile content and divides Kunert's volume into thirds. He states that one third of the work cannot be rescued while two-thirds of it could be redeemed. The irredeemable hostile third of the collection is, however, not just covertly hostile; it is »offen feindselig« and even the remainder is suspect: »der Rest [ist] stark infiltriert oder als Tarnung benutzt« (*B 5*, 17f.). Berger argues that the two-thirds which are not offensive should also be dismissed since they only served to disguise the sinister content of the remaining third. There is no evidence adduced for this claim; it is purely a rhetorical flourish. This is also the case with Berger's use of secret service language such as »infiltriert« (*B 5*, 17) and »Tarnung« (*B 5*, 18), which has a strong performative function to demonstrate to Pönig that Berger understands the danger of conspiracies.

Berger tries to walk a fine line between reviewing the literary qualities of the work and riffing on its potential security implications. He needs to cover all bases and hence he must diminish the literary value of Kunert's literature. He claims the work is »mittelmäßig oder noch drunter« (*B 5*, 17) and »eine Perversion seines [Kunerts] Talents« (*B 5*, 17). But he must also stress the security implications of Kunert's writing. The most explicit statement in this regard is the passage in which Berger argues that the work contains »Aufforderungen zu ideologischer Diversion« (*B 5*, 17), alluding to the official term »politisch-ideologische Diversion« (Engelmann/Joestel, *Grundsatzdokumente*, 126-128).

Berger concludes that western imperialist ideology was at work here: »Das Ganze zielt auf Meinungsmache im Sinne der imperialistischen Menschenrechtsheuchelei, auf geistige Formierung von Opposition unter solchem Vorzeichen« (*B 5*, 17). At the end of his review Berger offers

advice on how the regime should deal with Kunert. He states that Kunert will not emigrate: »Kunert scheint hierbleiben […] und ›Maulwurf‹ […] spielen zu wollen. Viel wäre schon gewonnen, wenn es gelänge, ihn zu veranlassen, seinen Weltschmerz in sich, in den Kosmos oder sonst wohin, nur nicht gegen uns zu kehren« (*B 5*, 18).

VI. The counter-revolutionary conspiracy theory and its literary incarnation

In an assessment of Wolfgang Hilbig's prose collection *Unterm Neumond*, Berger doubles down on the criminal nature of the author's writing. In this review from 1982 Berger includes the Soviet Union as one of the author's targets and accuses Hilbig outright of counter-revolutionary activity. The review summarises Hilbig's attacks providing concrete evidence in the form of page numbers from each of the stories. There are in total nineteen targets, including attacks against peace, the Stasi, the socialist economy, the USSR, solidarity and »our authorities« (*B 6*, 230). Moreover, the work is an explicit call to arms in the name of »Terrorismus, Brandstiftung«, »Konterrevolution« and »Krieg«, and it exhorts people to commit the crime of »Republikflucht« (*B 6*, 230).

Inciting counter-revolution is a far more serious charge than revisionism since it implies the full negation and rollback of the achievements of the revolution and the restoration of a prior pre-revolutionary order of things. Berger first uses the term counter-revolution in his negative review of Kunert's works in May 1970. Here he uses the epithet at the end to add emphasis that Kunert's works were written in a »revisionist spirit«. However, the last sentence makes Kunert's works out to be far worse than revisionist. Berger calls them »nihilistisch[], zynisch[], doppelbödig[]«, possessing »zweifellos eine konterrevolutionäre Qualität« (*B* 1, 41).

In linking the political charge of counter-revolution to the negative literary qualities of nihilism and cynicism Berger has effectively critiqued the work from all sides. The terms nihilistic and cynical were well-known codes in official literary circles and part of the language of socialist literary theory championed by Lukács, first in the expressionism debates of the nineteen-thirties and later in the fifties. From Lukács Berger had inherited the latter's distaste of modernism, expressionism and the avantgarde. In this schema modernism was pessimistic, nihilistic and fatalistic, distorted and fragmentary. The great modernist works were too subjective, offering

no clear way out of the aporias of capitalism, argued Lukács. In Lukács' essay »Es geht um den Realismus« (1938) he identified ›bad‹ examples of modernism in the works of Kafka, Joyce, Gide and Beckett, who presented »subjektivistische, verzerrte und entstellte Stimmungsnachklänge der Wirklichkeit« (Lukács, »Realismus«, 341). In ›swimming against the tide‹ of these ›decadent‹ modernists, Lukács championed instead critical realism, as practiced by Gorki, Thomas and Heinrich Mann and their forebears in the 19th century, who captured the »completeness of the human personality« (Lukács, »Realismus«, 314f.; Smetona, 110).

The entire arsenal of derogatory terms favoured by the Stasi, the censors, and by Stalinist literary critics stems, sadly, from Lukács. Lukács' literary theories formed the basis for official cultural policy that was mandated in missives issued by the Central Committee, such as the 1951 »ZK-Beschluß gegen Formalismus und Kosmopolitismus« (Judt, 318f.). Terms such as ›formalistisch‹ and ›subjektivistisch‹, ›dekadent‹ and ›solipsistisch‹ all find their way into Berger's reviews. Berger, like the regime, made counter-revolutionary activity a matter of literary style. If a writer wrote so-called formalistic, subjectivistic and decadent literature, they could also be accused of fomenting counter-revolution. But there was another rhetorical embellishment that Berger used to discredit his colleagues' works and their troublesome authors, namely that of accusing them of having a hidden agenda.

VII. Conspiracy theories: The intentional fallacy and secret meanings

The most serious form of conspiracy theory we find in Berger's reviews are ones in which he implies that the writer was a mouthpiece for a foreign imperial power. On 29 January 1972 Berger hands over to his Stasi officer, Pönig, a review of three essays by Rainer Kirsch, written in the years 1968 to 1970. The essays were titled »Herzmaschinen, Henschiels Satz, Moralquanten, (sic) Drei Porträts mit Abschweifungen« (*B* 2, 60). Kirsch belonged to the generation of GDR writers who campaigned for granting writers greater autonomy. Berger is well aware of this and is quick to dismiss the portraits as unsuitable for publication, denouncing them as »üble Machwerke« (*B* 2, 60). As we have seen on other occasions, Berger argues that their authorial intention was patently hostile. At the same time, he claims that the works were deceptive and only thinly disguised as portraits. Their real intention was »um das ›Moralsystem‹ des Sozialis-

mus zu verhöhnen, anzugreifen und unter dem Mantel scheinbar, (sic) höhnischer Bekenntnisse zum Sozialismus eine revisionistische Plattform zu entwickeln« (*B* 2, 60).

It is worth unpacking the rhetorical steps involved in Berger's denouncing Kirsch's work as subversive. First, it should be pointed out that Berger draws heavily on what western scholars of New Criticism debunked as the ›biographical fallacy‹ in which interpreters sought to identify behind the literary text the expression of an individual's will and intention. The so-called error of such reading techniques was that one could and should read literature to »learn more about how an AUTHOR lived, and what he or she felt about life« (Auger, 35, emphasis in original). This assumes that the author and narrative characters are identical. The »intentional fallacy« (35; 151) that also lies behind Berger's review is similar. This fallacy reads a text »in light of why we think the author wrote the work« (151).

Berger is guilty of perpetuating both fallacies, but since New Criticism was a western development, it is arguably not a pertinent yardstick to apply here. However, as one schooled in Marxist literary theories, first and foremost those of Georg Lukács, Berger should have been wary of reducing a text to an expression of its author's will. The Hungarian master of Marxist literary theory was, for instance, far less interested in the intentionality of writers than in the unconscious way their social background influenced their textual choices. Balzac, for instance, who Lukács proclaimed as the ideal-typical Marxist writer despite not being a Marxist at all, had accurately described the historical dialectic of the peasants' struggle against the »usurer-capitalists« (cit. Smetona, 112). In Lukács' view, literature had a unique ability – something that lay beyond the artist's creative genius – to »concentrate the social forces at work in the society it reflects« in an objective way (104). The real meaning of a work lay not in the work's style as an expression of »[die] souveräne Tat des Dichters« but in the all-encompassing, or »total« way he or she depicted »objective reality« (Lukács, »Expressionismus«, 141).

In light of this, Berger's argument that Kirsch was intentionally mocking the ›moral system‹ of socialism reads at best as a parody of Lukács' world-view. His is a bizarre kind of critical reading that tries too hard to read sinister meaning into the text. It is as if Berger had taken a perfectly legitimate critical method of reading – for instance the ›hermeneutics of suspicion‹ first suggested by Paul Ricoeur (cf. Felski, 2) – and applied it obsessively to the author's life rather than the text. To make his point, Berger must argue that the text had a literal and latent meaning. It is

not the text's formal qualities that interests him; instead he is hellbent on discerning the author's hidden agenda. As discussed above, this was to mock socialism and to propagate a specific political platform. Yet, Berger adduces no evidence for the hidden agenda, only the claim that Kirsch's professed loyalty was merely a smokescreen – a »Mantel scheinbar, höhnischer Bekenntnisse zum Sozialismus« (*B* 2, 60). Berger thereby took the form of critical reading, or a ›hermeneutics of suspicion‹, into an entirely different realm, elevating it well beyond the text into the realm of Cold War conspiracy theories.

Rather than take Kirsch's stories at face-value, Berger instead takes aim at their elusive latent meaning, a meaning that only his expert eye can see. He thereby meets Barkun's second criterion of conspiracy theory, namely that appearances are deemed to be misleading: »Nothing is as it seems. Appearances are deceptive, because conspirators wish to deceive in order to disguise their identities or their activities. Thus, the appearance of innocence is deemed to be benign« (Barkun, 3). Finally, Berger has one more rhetorical tool up his reviewer's sleeve: accusing his author of being a puppet of external conspiratorial forces.

VIII. Conspiracy theories: The author as puppet of hostile forces

In his review of Kirsch, Berger suggests that the latent, i.e. conspiratorial meaning of the texts was not produced by the individual unconscious mind or even, in a more postmodern vein, by some kind of collective unconscious, such as posited by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* in 1981. There was another political entity speaking through the author Kirsch, ventriloquizing, if you like, the author's voice. And the author was a wittingly and willingly accomplice in becoming the spokesperson for this hostile other voice. In short, the author was a puppet of capitalist forces and the »regime's opponents were ›agentless‹ persons« (Kirziuk, 82). This trick of imputing the presence of an external force to the author allows Berger to argue that the author was feigning allegiance to socialism while in reality being the mouthpiece for a hostile power. The views propagated were those of so-called ›bourgeois propaganda‹, by which Berger implies that Kirsch was disseminating western imperialist and anti-socialist ideology. This propaganda was especially pernicious, because it disguised itself as being in favour of improving socialism: »Es ist die alte Masche

der bürgerlichen Propaganda, die vorgibt, sich um den Sozialismus zu ›sorgen‹, ihn ›modernisieren‹, verbessern zu wollen usw.« (*B* 2, 60).
The best example of this fear that the writer was the mouthpiece of bourgeois propaganda is Berger's review of Kirsch's portraits, as discussed above. In the conclusion to his review Berger stresses that there was a systematic ideology behind the literary pieces – »ein wohldurchdachtes System« supporting the »revisionistische Plattform« (*B* 2, 70). This is evident in the way in which the ideas are developed across the three portraits, which display »eine systematische Steigerung und Vertiefung der antisozialistischen Propaganda« (*B* 2, 70). This propaganda aims no less at the »stille«, namely clandestine restoration of capitalism: »Das Ganze ist gekonnt und systematisch gemacht, und darum um so [sic] ernster zu bewerten« (*B* 2, 70). In a final flourish, Berger asks how could Kirsch be acting alone, hinting at the fact that Kirsch might be part of a group of plotters or even be acting on behalf of western intelligence forces: »Man fragt sich, inwieweit Rainer Kirsch als der alleinige Urheber angesehen werden kann« (*B* 2, 70). This final twist in his argument reminds us of Barkun's third principle of conspiracy theories, namely that »everything is connected« (Barkun, 3). This is because in this worldview there is no room for accident and there has to be a pattern to everything. The conspiracy theorist must forge the hidden connections and constantly be vigilant to make the links between seemingly random utterances or events (cf. 3).

IX. Conclusion

Surveying Uwe Berger's Stasi file and the clandestine literary reviews he wrote, it becomes clear that Berger was operating from a formulaic, ideological template. Yet, he did far more than pay lip-service to the dominant cultural theory of the East German regime concerning writers. He actively reinforced the belief that critical writers and anyone using dubious modernist techniques was guilty of engaging in anti-socialist activity that, at worst, was part of a western conspiracy to undermine socialism, and at best, had potential to mount a conspiracy with likeminded people. He not only reproduced the official rhetoric, he embellished upon it making assumptions about people he knew and worked closely with, even though he knew his allegations were most likely untrue. In Berger's black-and-white assessment of his peers' writing the Manichean dualism of conspiracy theories is hard to overlook. Moreover, Berger insinuates

that said writers were not working alone and could be puppets of hostile forces, namely of the capitalist West, although of course there was no evidence of this.

When analysing his communicative style with the help of conspiracy research, it does not appear that Berger denies writers all agency, as Kirkiuk argues, but rather implies that writers had *collective* agency or that they had too much agency. Indeed, they had enhanced their individual agency by actively joining forces with others at home and abroad. Berger magnifies writers' ability to inspire collective action with others and in fact exaggerates their agency. He also insinuates that writers' intentions were secret, a common feature of conspiracy theories against the regime. He tries to prove this by serving as a decoder of their alleged covert meanings for his officer.

Finally, it can be argued that Berger's reports meet the criteria for what Barkun has called a »systemic conspiracy« (Barkun, 6) theory. In the West, these function to »secur[e] control over a country, a region, or even the entire world. While the goals are sweeping, the conspiratorial machinery is generally simple: a single, evil organization implements a plan to infiltrate and subvert existing institutions« (6). As we have seen, a similar systemic conspiracy theory was alive and well in the Eastern bloc. Reigning communist parties believed the West was undermining the East to obtain world domination. If writers were puppets of the West, this helped to highlight writers' potential for harm. Since their activities were covert, the lack of real evidence for the involvement of Western persons was not an issue, because it only meant that one could not see it. As Barkun writes, conspiracy theories ultimately do not require evidence (cf. 7). For authoritarian regimes evidence could be replaced by pseudo-evidence such as the page numbers and quotations that Berger adduces as proof.

What changed over time in East Germany was the ability of the security forces to act on this pseudo-evidence that a conspiracy was afoot. The Stasi's ability to use the legal system diminished over time and legal action had to be replaced by covert surveillance. This meant that conspiracy theories could survive. The Stasi continued to peddle to their informers the same tired conspiracy theories that the imperialist west was to blame – exactly how this was so was never spelled out. Hence, I could concur with Kirziuk that conspiratorial thinking was widespread in the Eastern bloc not just in public discourse but in covert documents of the intelligence forces as well. While not all informers used conspiracy theories, in the cases where they did – as with informer ›Uwe‹ – conspiratorial

explanations in all their shades and nuances were used heavily. With Berger's reports, these ideas helped to encode literature in terms of a serious security threat. Dangerous literature was that in which hostile intent was manifest – in the form of anti-socialist or hateful attacks on society, the party and socialism. But literature was equally dangerous when there were hidden threats lurking between the lines – or when the author secretly harboured intentions of planning a counter-revolution and/or plotting with western governments. By unearthing hidden threats everywhere, informants such as Berger extended agency from the author to external political forces. This meant the Stasi was dealing with an unholy alliance of internal and external sources of opposition. This alliance helped to exonerate the SED of blame for domestic unrest and allowed the issues spoken about in literature to be easily dismissed. Finally, exaggerating the nature of the threat to security delivered the perfect legitimation needed for the party to refuse to engage with the substance of reformists' ideas and to continue to pursue its aggressive campaign against reforms right through the Gorbachev years of glasnost and perestroika up until the implosion of the regime in 1989/90.

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