

# AN INTIMATE LOOK AT TOTALITARIAN REPRESSION

Paul Hollander

*Dialectics, Dogmas, and Dissent: Stories from East German Victims of Human Rights Abuse* by John Rodden (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010)

Of all the now defunct communist states, the so-called German Democratic Republic—more often called East Germany—was among the least democratic, most oppressive, and most notorious as the builder (in 1961) of the Berlin Wall designed to complete the imprisonment of the entire population. The Wall was only the most visible section of the elaborate fortifications and lethal obstacles that extended over the entire border with West Germany. It was a fitting symbol of communist totalitarianism, which, unlike other police states, was committed to preventing population movements across its borders.

While claiming that the Wall was designed to hinder the infiltration of Western spies and saboteurs, it was clearly built to make it impossible for East Germans to depart

their country for a Western destination, usually West Germany. Such relocations had to be prevented at all costs, for both practical and symbolic reasons: the loss of manpower was staggering, amounting to millions that included many of the most highly trained citizens; their exodus was not good for the economy. Even more important, arguably, was the symbolic significance of such population movements. The exodus was ideologically intolerable, as it conveyed decisively the widespread popular rejection of the government—people voted with their feet, leaving behind the new social system that was supposed to be superior to all others known in history.

To claim—as was sometimes done—that all these escapees were deluded and suffering from false consciousness was insufficient. Their misconduct could not be tolerated; they had to stay confined in order to enjoy the blessings of the system and be cured of false consciousness, or prevent its insidious rise. At last, the opportunity to escape was also bad for social discipline and political regimentation: the option to remove oneself from the stifling political environment reduced the incentive to conform, to adjust to the demands of the regime. A related characteristic of East Germany was its unusually large and efficient political police, the State Security Service, abbreviated “Stasi,” that relied on a huge network of informers, full and part time, paid and unpaid. The Orwellian misuse of language was another notable feature of the East German regime (as of other communist ones as well), calling itself and demanding to be called “democratic” (German Democratic Republic, or GDR). The highly specialized political police force was designated

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the “state security service.” The essence of the totalitarian police state was revealed in its conceptions and convictions of what its “security” required, or consisted of, including the Wall. People could be and had been imprisoned for reading Orwell, as were several of those interviewed by the author of this book.

The number of informers per population in East Germany that was supposed to ensure “state security” exceeded not only corresponding proportions in other communist states but also those in Nazi Germany. As the author has written:

The GDR certainly exceeded the Third Reich as a terror regime in some respects. For instance, between 1933 and 1945 the greater German Reich had a total of approximately forty thousand Gestapo agents. By contrast, the much smaller GDR—with only one-quarter to one-fifth of the population . . . employed more than ninety thousand Stasi agents. . . . By the time of its dissolution in 1990 the Stasi had 91,000 permanent and 174,000 unofficial employees of whom 109,000 were spies. . . . The GDR had [as another author quoted had pointed out] “the highest ratio of secret police to population of any state in history. If unpaid informers are taken into account, some estimates put the ratio of Stasi and their informers as high as one to every 6.5 citizens—considerably higher than [in] Stalin’s Russia or Hitler’s Germany . . . there was one Gestapo agent per 2000 citizens and in Stalin’s Soviet Union . . . one NKVD agent per 5830 citizens.” (162–63, 161–62)

It is easier to understand why the authorities in Nazi Germany felt more secure and thus in lesser need of informers, since they

enjoyed greater popularity and legitimacy than did the GDR. More difficult to grasp is why the latter had more informers per population than other communist states that were similarly, or even more, unpopular and illegitimate. Possibly the proximity of West Germany (the seductive countermodel where people spoke the same language) made the rulers in East Germany more insecure and anxious about their grip on power. One may also speculate that it was the only communist state with a Nazi past that might have also inspired more repressive policies.

As some of the attributes of the East German regime sketched above suggest, it was among the purest embodiments of totalitarianism, a concept that has been dismissed by many Western intellectuals following the death of Stalin and the attendant reforms. *Dialectics, Dogma, and Dissent* helps us better understand the concept by showing what was distinctive about these systems (here exemplified by East Germany) and especially their innovative policies and institutions of repression and thought control, reflected in the individual case studies the book provides.

The preoccupation with ideas and the control of their dissemination and suppression—if unorthodox—was central to such systems. It may seem paradoxical that totalitarian authorities treated ideas as if they could determine behavior and therefore devoted huge resources to the indoctrination of their subjects, seeking to persuade them of their legitimacy and good intentions.

At the same time, the same systems created institutions of coercion and repression of exceptional power, ruthlessness, and complexity, as if they did not trust their own efforts to indoctrinate and motivate the population. There was little doubt that in the final analysis the behavior of the citizen was to be determined by coercive institutions

such as the political police and not by their loyalty, supposedly generated by political education and propaganda they were exposed to from an early age.

The most enlightening aspect of this study (for the American and Western reader) may be the light it throws on the specifics and daily experience of the political repression that prevailed in this “democratic republic,” which resembled policies in other communist states. Of further interest is how the citizens justified and explained (in retrospect) their conformity and ambivalence about the system. It should be noted here that East Germany was the most developed, that is, the most industrially advanced and prosperous communist society, which provided its citizens with the highest standard of living in comparison with all other communist states. Nevertheless, this did not make it any less repressive or more tolerant, contrary to the received wisdom of many Western social scientists who believe that scarcities are the major determinant of political conflict and repression.

The study also raises important questions (without actually answering them) as to why a small number of individuals are willing to resist an oppressive political system, and under what circumstances people are more likely to become dissidents or dissenters, rather than conform and thereby maximize their personal security.

The author, who has written a great deal about communist East Germany and especially its system of education, has chosen to approach the topic—repression or “human rights abuse”—mainly by interviewing a handful of East Germans, all victims of such abuses, though not all of them dissidents. In addition, he makes excellent use of a wide range of printed sources, most of them in German. He has also visited, in the company of three former inmates, “one of the GDR’s most notorious centers of interrogation and

incarceration, the infamous ‘Camp X’ . . . in eastern Berlin” (xvi).

Several of those interviewed he met in 2003 at the Orwell Centenary Conference in Berlin, titled “Books That Led to Jail.” During the 1990s, he taught history and social studies in East German high schools to learn firsthand about the social-political changes that have taken place since the late 1980s.

Most of the people the author interviewed were university educated, including academic intellectuals, several of them authors, some of them high school teachers. Such people were obviously more articulate and informative about human rights violations than those with less education and without similar experiences, but such a small and skewed “sample” does not allow the reader to learn about social-political conditions that reflect perceptions shaped by different social positions and circumstances. The author explains his preference for focusing on “the ordeal of East Germany’s unsung dissenters” by observing that many “advocates of human rights have ignored communist abuses and demonized the West and capitalism. . . . This book exposes that double standard, whereby capitalism (and fascism . . .) is vilified but communism (sometimes even its Stalinist form) is defended, or at least rationalized” (1). He also intended “to discover the mechanisms of power that drive people into becoming oppressors and victims” (162). Given his emphasis on victims, we learn a lot less about the motives and mentality of the oppressors.

While this is a well-researched, original, and highly informative study, it has a somewhat disjointed quality. Its three parts are insufficiently distinguished from one another, and chapter titles are to some degree interchangeable. Major findings and important data are sometimes buried in the endnotes, as for example the author’s conclusions

about the sources and determinants of opposition to the regime (see note 9, especially page 163), as well as figures highlighting the magnitude of the regime's coercive policies and its consequences. Thus "at least fifty thousand East Germans committed suicide as a direct consequence of state political oppression; the total number of victims of political persecution, forced relocation, and various forms of state-sponsored harassment or intimidation numbered more than one million. . . . 4,573,447 East Germans fled the GDR" (163). These figures are quoted from another study.

The book is particularly informative about the specifics and mechanisms of attempted thought control and the obsessive official preoccupation with politically incorrect or putatively subversive ideas, opinions, or attitudes, and how selected individuals responded to these policies. Such totalitarian intolerance is not without contemporary relevance given the present-day profusion of radical Islamic groups, movements, and political systems similarly committed to the eradication of what they regard as incorrect or unorthodox ideas and attitudes and their human carriers. Present-day radical Islam shares with totalitarian systems and schools of thought a profound fear of and belief in the corruptibility of human beings, which serves to legitimate its ruthlessness and intolerance.

At a time when most communist states no longer exist and their varied misdeeds are largely forgotten, this volume is a bracing reminder of the totalitarian variety of evil-doing, nourished by uncompromising beliefs and commitments.

## THE PERSONAL LIVES OF SCHOLARS

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*Michael P. Federici*

*A Friendship That Lasted a Lifetime:  
The Correspondence between Alfred  
Schütz and Eric Voegelin*, translated by  
William Petropulos, edited by Gerhard  
Wagner and Gilbert Weiss (Columbia:  
University of Missouri Press, 2011)

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Alfred Schütz (1899–1959) and Eric Voegelin (1901–1985) were students of the Austrian legal theorist Hans Kelsen. Schütz was interested in phenomenology, especially in its relation to the social sciences. Voegelin was a philosopher of history and consciousness. They shared common intellectual interests and the experience of escaping from the Nazis after the *Anschluss*. Both immigrated to the United States. Their correspondence began in 1938 at the time of the *Anschluss*. Both had reasons to fear Nazi occupation; Schütz was a Jew and Voegelin's scholarship undermined the very idea of race-based ideology.

Reading the correspondence between Schütz and Voegelin, one is reminded why the exchange of thoughts and sentiments between two thinkers can be so interesting. What is often lost or invisible to the reader of published scholarly works is the personal context in which they were written. The exchange of letters between scholars,

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