Obituary:

Erich Mielke—the career of a German Stalinist

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On May 26 Erich Mielke, who for years had headed the East German secret police, or Stasi, died aged 92 years in an East Berlin old people's home. Mielke was probably the most hated man in the German Democratic Republic (GDR—East Germany). History will record him as one of the greatest Stalinist criminals, whose name will be mentioned in the same breath as Vyshinsky, the chief prosecutor at the Moscow trials, or Stalin's secret service bosses Yezhov **,** Yagoda and Beria.

For over 40 years, Mielke occupied the office of Minister for State Security (MfS) in the GDR. In this role he commanded an apparatus of thousands of full-time agents and approximately 200,000 “unofficial collaborators”, or informers. This close-knit network of informants was called “snoop and snatch” in the vernacular. Mielke's apparatus was practically all-pervasive. With Prussian thoroughness and uniform guidelines, so-called “cadre files” were created about all the respective employees and members in the factories, party organisations, trade unions, police, armed forces, schools and cultural establishments.

The State Security Service (Stasi) was first established in East Germany under the Soviet occupying authorities following World War II, along the lines of the Stalinist KGB. It was initially subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior after the establishment of the GDR in 1949, but then eventually became a ministry in its own right. It was not subject to any form of parliamentary control. Officially supposed to serve the fight against the “class enemy”, its main task was the suppression of any independent movement or thought on the part of the working masses, i.e., precisely what the East German regime feared more than anything else. And rightfully so, as the workers' rebellion of 1953 would demonstrate.

In order to be able to correctly evaluate Mielke's role, it is essential to look at the history of the GDR, the German Communist Party (KPD) and the role of Stalinism. In many respects the person of Erich Mielke reflects the tragic development of the German workers' movement in the twentieth century.

Erich Mielke was born in 1907 in the Berlin district of Wedding, the son of a cartwright. His parents were founding members of the KPD in 1918. In 1921 he joined its youth organisation and afterwards followed an apprenticeship as a shipping clerk. He was politically active from 1927, becoming a KPD member, guarding their meetings as part of a “party self-defence” group.

Mielke became a communist at a time when hundreds of thousands joined the KPD in Germany and millions voted for it. The senseless slaughter of the First World War; the role of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which first supported the war and then together with the reactionary *Freikorps* subjugated the 1918 November revolution; the triumph of the Russian Revolution and the social misery of the early 1920s had given rise to the belief among a broad layer of the population that only a communist revolution offered a way out of the social dead end.

There can be little doubt that Mielke was also gripped by such convictions when he joined the KPD. To see already in the 20-year-old Mielke the later secret service boss, would not only be psychologically implausible but also ignore the impact of historical circumstances on a person who was never characterised by any special intellectual independence and resoluteness.

The KPD Mielke joined in 1927 was, however, quite a different one to that which had been created eight years earlier under the leadership of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Following the deaths of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, who were murdered only two weeks after the establishment of the party, the KPD underwent a rapid sequence of leadership changes without the organisation being able to consolidate itself politically or programmatically.

The violent factional struggles that shook the KPD could at first be attributed to the inexperience and immaturity of the new party's leadership, which had to immediately prove itself in a situation of fierce class battles. But after 1923 the disputes were more and more shaped by the struggle between the Stalin faction and the Trotskyist Left Opposition in the Soviet Union.

The “German October” of 1923 played a crucial role for the development of both the German and the Soviet Communist parties. The KPD had missed a unique revolutionary opportunity due to the hesitancy and indecision of its leadership, and suffered a heavy defeat. In his “Lessons of October”, Trotsky pointed to the responsibility of the leadership of the Communist International under Zinoviev and Stalin, who had been in close contact with the KPD throughout the year. He drew a parallel to Zinoviev's behaviour in October 1917, when together with Kamenev he had opposed the revolutionary uprising endorsed by Lenin and Trotsky.

In the Soviet Union, a violent campaign against “Trotskyism” ensued. Under these circumstances, it became impossible for the KPD to draw the political lessons from the October defeat. KPD chairman Heinrich Brandler was exclusively made scapegoat and replaced after a short interlude by two Zinoviev supporters, Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow. Ernst Thaelmann also ascended to the top leadership of the party for the first time. When the alliance between Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev broke down in 1925 and the latter pair formed the United Opposition with Trotsky, Fischer and Maslow had to vacate the field in Germany, whereupon Thaelmann became party chairman.

Ernst Thaelmann only joined the KPD in December 1920 with the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD.) He had made his name as a militant trade unionist and prominent member of the SPD, which he had joined in 1903 in Hamburg. His break with the SPD took place because of its subordination to the bourgeois state. He seems to have had few thoughts about the more fundamental questions of programme and theory underlying the evolution of the SPD, questions with which Rosa Luxemburg had intensively struggled for 20 years. At least, he wrote nothing about them.

Despite his dislike of the SPD's policies, Thaelmann remained in certain respects under the sway of the SPD's conceptions. Above all he brought into the KPD the organisational fetishism, which had marked the trade

unions and sections of the SPD in the pre-war period. Organisation, discipline and activity were more important than clarifying questions of programme. Before he became party chairman, Thaelmann took over the presidency of the *Rote Frontkaempferbund* (RFB—Red Fighters Front, a paramilitary organisation directed against the right-wing military associations), whose uniformed members were a feature of every KPD demonstration.

Underlying this was a rather vulgar understanding of the class struggle. The fight for socialism was essentially regarded as a purely organisational task: militant action in the factories and on the streets would force the state to its knees. This included adventurist armed confrontations. Thousands of workers and the many more unemployed that were recruited learnt nothing politically, other than being able to follow organisational instructions. What had constituted the strength of the SPD in its Marxist period—its ability to raise the political and cultural level of broad sections of the working class—was pushed to a great extent into the background.

Thaelmann was well equipped to blindly and unconditionally follow Stalin's zigzag course. He showed neither understanding nor interest in the arguments of the Left Opposition, which defended the Marxist conception of the international character of the proletarian revolution against Stalin's nationalist path of "socialism in a single country". The vulgar pragmatism of Stalin was closer to his own thinking than the political far-sightedness of Trotsky. Under Thaelmann's leadership the KPD combined slanderous campaigns against "Trotskyism" with hysterical denunciations of the SPD—denunciations that remained completely hollow and ineffective, since they were unable to win social-democratic workers away from the SPD to the KPD.

It was in this atmosphere that Mielke joined the KPD in 1927. A relatively minor episode throws a distinct light on his character. In 1951, he changed his résumé. In the course of a purge of the party, all members had to fill out a questionnaire, meant to uncover any affiliation to "anti-party groupings" in the KPD of the 1920s; in particular "Trotskyists" and "Brandlerites". Mielke dated his party membership back to 1925 and stated he had been the political leader of a local street branch and had undertaken a "struggle against the ultra-left Trotskyists".

The party work that the young Mielke actually carried out was quite typical for the KPD at that time. It consisted almost exclusively of organisational or propaganda activity. At times he participated in the *Rote Hilfe* (Red Aid), at other times he was active in the agitprop group "Red Wedding". Besides this, he participated in the street battles of the RFB.

What Mielke learnt and internalised were typical Prussian virtues such as following orders, subordinating oneself and lashing out at those lower down the scale when the situation permitted. Beside Thaelmann, his political mentors were Heinz Neumann and Hermann Remmele, who formed the narrow leading circle of the KPD until 1932 and unconditionally carried out the course dictated by Stalin.

These years shaped Mielke's political character. Critical thinking and self-criticism always remained alien for him, open argument and democratic discussion were foreign concepts. It is therefore no surprise that one searches Mielke's biography in vain for his own political opinions. All his life he remained someone who "received instructions," even when he had reached the top and there was no longer a superior to give him instructions. His final Kafkaesque appearance before the East German parliament in autumn 1989, as he announced to an astonished public: "I love you all anyway", was the expression of this deeply internalised self-understanding exaggerated to absurdity.

The KPD leadership under Thaelmann had long given up the patient political struggle to win social democratically minded workers. These were finally rebuffed by the ultra-left course that Stalin pushed through the Comintern in 1929, which found its German expression in the notorious theory of "social fascism".

According to this schema, fascism and social democracy were "twins", and both had to be combated. The KPD resolutely rejected forming a united front with the SPD against the fascist danger, as Trotsky untiringly called for from his Turkish exile. This revealed the indifference of the KPD leadership, accustomed to command and subordination, in relation to the thinking of millions of workers who still half-heartedly trusted the SPD. In this way, the KPD made a decisive contribution to dividing the German working class and smoothing the way for Hitler.

The policy of the KPD assumed almost criminal dimensions, when, in the summer of 1931, it supported a referendum initiated by the NSDAP, even renaming it a "red referendum", aimed at removing the SPD-led government in Prussia. The Nazis were strengthened by this manoeuvre, while workers supporting the SPD were driven even further from the KPD.

Mielke became unemployed at that time, when unemployment reached the four million mark in Germany. For a short time he worked for the KPD paper the "Red Flag", but without success, it never published one of his articles.

The date of the "red referendum," August 9 1931, also occupies a special place in Mielke's biography. On the same day, the KPD leadership in Berlin under Heinz Neumann, then editor-in-chief of the "Red Flag", decided to launch a retaliatory attack against a hated police unit. Two policemen were shot during the armed operation in Buelow Square. Mielke participated in the attack as a member of the party's "self-defence group". It is however debatable whether he was among the gunmen, even if over 60 years later a West Berlin court convicted him of that crime, although it had come long ago under the statute of limitations.

Anyway, the party sent him into exile to Moscow.

From autumn 1932, Mielke attended the Comintern's Military-political School, and afterwards the Lenin School. He was accepted on the recommendation of Neumann, who was also now living in Moscow and was active in the Comintern. Only complete opportunists could survive at the school, since it entailed adapting to the constantly changing line of Stalin's CPSU.

The best pupils became members of the school's activist committee, received better marks and enjoyed some privileges. Erich Mielke belonged to these activists. "Paul Bach," as he called himself from now on, made himself particularly popular with his superiors, whom he diligently supplied with so-called "disposition reports". In these reports, schoolmates and teachers were blackened, and they could then count on the appropriate repressive penalty. It can be assumed that it was during this period that Mielke discovered his "policeman's heart", which always beat more quickly whenever he sniffed any opposition to Stalinism.

At this time the Stalinist secret police, NKVD, was dragging thousands and thousands of innocent communists out of their homes at night in order to arrest, torture and often liquidate them. They did not hesitate to include pupils from the Lenin school or émigré communists. Mielke noted in his résumé that he regularly participated in court hearings against traitors of Marxism in the mid 1930s.

During his time in Moscow, he did not miss any opportunity to profess his support for Stalin. For him, he wrote: "Stalin was a part of my education and guided me in many difficult situations ". Later, Mielke told Stasi co-workers, how disgusted he had been by some of the prominent communists who were condemned during the Moscow trials under false pretences. He said what lamentable figures they all were.

Like many other German émigré communists, in the autumn of 1936 he went to Spain and joined the International Brigades. According to his own reports, he was in charge of a company as captain. But that is extremely doubtful. There are several survivors from the International Brigades who know Mielke from quite different activities in Spain. The writer Walter Janka encountered him as an officer of the SIM, the Stalinist secret police in Spain. The GPU could always rely on Mielke, when it came to liquidating unwanted political opponents from within the own camp. What

Franco's troops could not do at the front, the GPU carried out behind the lines: they sent thousands of Trotskyists and Anarchists to their deaths.

After the defeat in Spain, for which Stalin's politics carried the main responsibility, Mielke fled to Belgium and France. In contrast to many others, he did not return to the Soviet Union. Mielke, an extremely distrustful man, preferred to play it safe. He had probably also heard that in Moscow, his political mentors Neumann, Remmele and Kippenberger had been pushed into the cold by Stalin.

In Brussels, Mielke worked first in a German group of emigrants. Later he travelled to France, where there are further black marks in his biography. Between 1943 and 1944, Mielke was busy in a construction team, which carried out contracts for the notorious *Organisation Todt* (Death Organisation). This was responsible for the building projects of the Nazis, among other things for the building of defence systems like the “Atlantic barrier”.

In December 1944, Mielke returned with one of these *Todt*-groups to Germany. The official former Stalinist party in East Germany (SED) version, however, reads a little differently. A celebratory address by the SED central committee for Mielke's eightieth birthday read: “your courage and your selfless work at the side of the Soviet class comrades in the Great Patriotic War remain unforgotten.”

Back in Germany, he was already a police inspector in the Soviet occupied zone in June 1945 in Berlin Lichtenberg. Walter Ulbricht, who had returned from Moscow with a group of faithful Stalinists, found in Mielke the man he needed to carry out the dirty work. Months later, Mielke had already risen to direct the “justice and police” department which was subordinate to the KPD. Shortly after the establishment of the GDR on October 12 1949 the Ministry for State Security (MfS) was established, in whose construction Mielke played a major role. The MfS adopted almost all the methods of the KGB, and officers of the latter controlled the organisation for a long time.

This Stasi apparatus did not have the least democratic legitimacy. It was a political secret police, investigatory authority and often judge all rolled into one. The MfS had its own prisons, in which socialist political opponents often languished for years, even though they were innocent of any crime. At the beginning of the 1950s, anyone who criticised the policies of Stalin, Ulbricht or the GDR was dubbed a “Trotskyist”.

The MfS was unprepared for the workers' uprising June 17 1953, which was directed against the introduction of fixed work quotas and social cuts. Mielke's superior at that time, William Zaisser, was sacked. Following mass arrests, several strike leaders were condemned to death, and Mielke finally made a name for himself.

Zaisser's place was first taken by Ernst Wollweber, a man with a long history in the communist movement and someone who had proved himself in the German underground against the Nazis. For this reason he represented too great a danger for the clique around Ulbricht and in 1957 he was replaced by Mielke as head of the MfS.

When Erich Honecker replaced Ulbricht in 1971 as party leader, he was able to largely thanks to Mielke's services. In return, Mielke got a position on the SED Politburo, and was also given charge of the department of foreign espionage. Markus Wolff, the famous spy boss in the GDR, considered Mielke excessively vain and could not stand him. Wolff did not involve Mielke in his own operations because he totally mistrusted his “colleague”.

The relationship between the Stasi and SED found its most grotesque expression in Wandlitz, the forest settlement north of Berlin where most of the SED big wigs lived in uniform-style houses. They were not particularly luxurious. But Mielke would not have been Mielke, if he had not monitored his neighbours. According to reports, the GDR elite and their families did not visit one another very often, since they distrusted one other. Mielke also collected information industriously about the private lives of the Ministers and central committee members. He had practically everyone in his hand, including Honecker.

The whole thing assumed Orwellian dimensions when Mielke took the podium for the last time and shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall announced in the East German parliament,: “we (the Stasi) have an extraordinarily high level of contact with working people.” The Stalinist perversion of socialism could not have been expressed more clearly.