

Anderson: Artists and the Stasi in Stalinist East Germany

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Annekatriin Hendel presented her documentary *Traitors to the Fatherland (Vaterlandsverräter)*, about the writer and informer Paul Gratzik in the former East Germany, at the Berlin Film Festival three years ago.

In Hendel's latest documentary, *Anderson*, shown at the festival in February this year and recently released in cinemas, her focus is Sascha Anderson (born 1953), an artist and spy for the Stasi (short for *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* —Ministry for State Security)—the intelligence agency in Stalinist East Germany (GDR—German Democratic Republic). The poet was a central figure in the youthful artistic scene in East Germany in the 1980s, concentrated in East Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg district.

Hendel speaks with numerous former friends and acquaintances of Anderson's, including singer Ekkehard Maaß, ceramicist Wilfriede Maaß, poet Bert Papenfuß-Gorek, painter Cornelia Schleime and current federal commissioner for the Stasi records, journalist Roland Jahn, as well as Anderson himself.

Maaß still lives in Prenzlauer Berg. Speaking of the situation that emerged after singer-songwriter and dissident Wolf Biermann was stripped of East German citizenship in 1976, philosopher Rudolf Bahro (*The Alternative*) was arrested in 1977 and the subsequent wave of emigration, Maaß describes it as a "deep void". He relates how his kitchen became a centre for young artists to meet who were opposed to the Stalinist GDR.

The interviewees explain how the hedonistic Anderson came to Berlin from Dresden in the early 1980s and became the idol of the scene. As a poet, punk singer and organiser, he fascinated everyone. Anderson's main activity was directed towards expanding existing free spaces. He tirelessly organised exhibitions, concerts, alternative films, the publication of books and the celebration of an alternative Christmas. His own work was often published by the left-wing Rotbuch Verlag in West Berlin.

At the same time, Anderson was supplying detailed reports and comments on friends and colleagues to the Stasi. In

1986, he left the GDR. Roland Jahn, who had been expelled by the East German authorities, tells how he met Anderson in West Berlin and put him in contact with *Der Spiegel* magazine.

Der Spiegel proceeded to publish an interview with Anderson about the cultural scene in East Germany under the headline "The generation after us is more free". After the collapse of the GDR in 1990, Jahn found his personal discussions with Anderson in the archives of the Stasi. When Anderson was exposed by attorney Jürgen Fuchs and Biermann in the early 1990s, many former friends were shocked.

Hendel's film treats the period of intellectual life in the GDR that culminated in the euphoria over Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika policy and preceded Stalinism's collapse. The rejection of the GDR was articulated among young people in the punk movement. Layers of middle class youth spouted profanities and in anarchist fashion promoted individual self-expression as the highest good in opposition to the repressive state. Alternative lifestyles were inspired by Western subcultures, such as the West Berlin squatter scene.

The anarchist Papenfuß-Gorek described the confused political atmosphere: "We were against the GDR party dictatorship, not explicitly against the idea of socialism or communism...there were many who described themselves as real Marxists. There was everyone from anarchists to people who saw the Western welfare state as an ideal. That was basically the spectrum".

The revelation that the Stasi influenced this environment is one of the film's strengths. Maaß is convinced that in the crisis atmosphere, the Stalinist authorities feared that a polarising artist could emerge "who knew something politically", a type of second Biermann. Maaß undoubtedly refers to the early Biermann, some of whose songs he admires. Some showed a distinct lack of respect for and strident opposition towards the East German state party (SED). However, after being stripped of his citizenship, Biermann gradually developed into a virulent anti-

Communist. Today, he regularly praises imperialist military interventions.

Instead of a “second Biermann”, Anderson appeared. Without the assistance of the Stasi, he could certainly not have assumed his prominent position in the scene that earned him the nickname the “culture minister”. “Already in the GDR, Sascha Anderson was what one would call a modern manager”, according to Hendel in the *Tagespiegel*. At a certain point, according to another interviewee in the film, no young artist emerged without Anderson’s involvement.

Anderson asserts in the film that he thought as little of the GDR as the rest of the artists, but recognised that the Stasi was “the only stabilising factor of the system”. He was able to discuss the crisis in the East Germany openly with his colleagues, he asserts. Despite anger at the Stasi when it refused to spring him from jail (Anderson was detained for a time for cheque fraud), he continued his spying activities.

The film suggests that the Stasi responded very consciously to the crisis of the GDR. Questions remain: Why was Anderson allowed to travel to the West in the 1980s, when the Stasi knew full well that the media there would be interested in his insider knowledge? In 1976, the reaction had been different. When the first signatories of the protest letter against the stripping of Biermann’s citizenship turned to the Western press, they were denounced as “counter-revolutionary”.

In the film, Biermann looks back and recalls how Stasi agents or informers held leading positions in the GDR opposition. The Stasi also infiltrated the democratic opposition during German reunification. Many figures who paved the way for the re-introduction of capitalism in East Germany under the guise of democratic renewal turned out to be Stasi spies.

This group included the opposition lawyer Wolfgang Schnur of “Democratic Awakening” and “Alliance for Germany”, as well as Ibrahim Böhme, co-founder of the Social Democratic Party in the GDR. The last leader of the GDR, Lothar de Maizière, is also suspected of having worked for the Stasi.

The artist and spy Anderson embodies the period that ended with the collapse of Stalinism in the USSR and Eastern Europe. This background also explains the appeal of his unprincipled manoeuvres and unscrupulousness and his artistic success. It is not accidental that a milieu looking for opportunities for individual advancement was attracted to the artistically unusual and paradoxical, on the one hand, and superficially radical bluster, on the other. The lifestyle these East German circles cultivated was similar to that pursued by the Greens and protest movements in the West. The question of a socialist alternative to Stalinism was never seriously posed.

This development was preceded in the 1970s by the disillusionment of artists and intellectuals who had previously hoped to become involved in exercising state power. Bahro’s book *The Alternative* expressed this striving, without treading on the toes of Stalinism. The frustration and bitterness in these circles were correspondingly great after his arrest.

To a certain extent, Anderson shared the elitist conceptions of these layers, and even felt as an informant that he was part of an elite that stood above the primitive SED bureaucrats. “There were many of this sort of informant, who were not petty snoopers in anoraks, but rather charismatic people in key positions”, Hendel recalls. This fact is particularly revealing and places a large question mark over the “oppositional” spirit of the rebellious 1980s in the GDR.

Unfortunately, the film wastes a lot of time dealing with personal expressions of disappointment. Hendel, who was in the 1980s herself a bystander in the alternative artistic scene, assumes, like the other protagonists, an apolitical, moralising stance towards Anderson as a social phenomenon, which is inadequate for the subject matter at hand.

Evidence of Anderson’s earlier activity with the KGB and his initial political motive of being a “spy on the invisible front line” are dismissed as mere trifles. In return, Anderson apparently welcomes Hendel’s naive attempt to present him as someone with a double identity (at one point in the film, she even has him play chess against himself).

As a whole, however, following *Traitors to the Fatherland*, Hendel once again presents interesting material in *Anderson* on artists in the GDR.

The opportunism of Anderson’s former collaborators, who now seek to forgive him for his personal betrayal, is repugnant, and revealing. Papenfuß-Gorek is working with him again on joint projects. Schleime shows a degree of understanding for the aesthetic informer, who, she says, did not display a spy’s traits. Jahn, the government official responsible for the Stasi archives, expresses his disappointment that Anderson had not sought to speak with him personally thus far.

The trailer for *Anderson* (in German) can be accessed here .



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