

Christian Domnitz (†)

Agency of the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records, Berlin (BStU)

SURVEILLANCE KEEPING STEP WITH INTEGRATING ELITES: THE 'OPERATIVGRUPPE MOSKAU' OF THE EAST GERMAN STASI

Introduction

The paper argues that the growing exchange and multilateralization of relations in the Eastern bloc required – in the perception of the communist secret services – an interlinking of control between the communist dictatorships. This interlinking of the services' secret police branches was a starting point of cross-border surveillance in the Eastern bloc. This is demonstrated by the example of an outpost of the East German Stasi in the USSR, the *Operativgruppe Moskau*. Designed in the 1950s to monitor East German citizens in the USSR, it developed ambitions to be an arena for the collaboration between the Stasi and the KGB in the 1980s, in addition to the KGB's representation in East Berlin. Beyond the high-level cooperation of the Stasi with Soviet advisers in East Berlin, the *Operativgruppe* became a contact zone between the two services at the working level. However, the deep national rootedness of the Stasi officers posed challenges to the cooperation.

Little is known about the structural conditions of secret police cooperation at the working level and on site. Against the background of mistrust between the nations of the Eastern bloc, one might even ask, whether there was any on-site cooperation at all – beyond the formalised exchange of the international departments of the services. This paper gives an outline of the working practices of East German Stasi officers in the centre of Soviet power, and it sketches how common operations were

conducted and administrated at the working level. It portrays the character of this cooperation and evaluates the cultural encounters that the officers experienced in the Soviet Union.¹

The so-called *Operativgruppe Moskau* ('Moscow operative group') became institutionalised in 1959 with 9 employees. In 1986, it had 21 employees, including its outposts.² It was part of a network of bilateral relations at the working level. Numerous 'operative groups' of the communist secret police services in the capitals of the Eastern bloc mostly had the character of liaison offices, providing practical support on a low level. The services of the Soviet Union, the GDR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Cuba were the core of this system. The hosting services knew about the existence and about the assignments of the foreign services that they called 'brother organs'.

The relations of the secret services followed and reflected the relations of their countries.³ When the East German state was founded in October 1949, it depended entirely on the Soviet Union. And so did the East German security organs, which were guided directly by the Soviet secret services. During the 1950s and 1960s, East Germany reached the status of a 'junior partner' of the Soviet Union, and so did the Stasi. However, even as 'junior partners' their existence depended on Soviet protection.

From the beginning, the leadership of both countries aimed to tie East Germany close to the Soviet Union, which led to an exchange on several levels. The 'thaw' in the USSR after Stalin's death did bring not only a liberalisation in culture, but also an opening of the socialist economies and a rapid intensification of Comecon activity. Already by 1951, GDR students had been sent to Soviet universities. Soon after the last German

¹ The evidence is derived from a research project about the structure, the operations, and the everyday life of Stasi operative groups in other countries of the Eastern bloc. The project was run in the BStU's research department from December 2011 to February 2015. The results were published in German, see Ch. Domnitz, with coll. of M. Tantzsch, *Kooperation und Kontrolle. Die Arbeit der Stasi-Operativgruppen im sozialistischen Ausland* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016; Series: Analysen und Dokumente. Wissenschaftliche Reihe des BStU, 46). For information about the author and the project, contact: georg.herbstritt@bstu.bund.de.

² Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR (hereinafter: BStU) Hauptabteilung (hereinafter: HA) II, Abt. 10: Übersicht über die in der Operativgruppe Moskau tätigen, Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (hereinafter: MfS), Mitarbeiter, no. 754, pp. 138–142; *ibid.*: Übersicht über die Mitarbeiter der OG Moskau/Leningrad/Kiew/Trasse/Krivoy Rog, Moskau, 25 Sept. 1986, BStU, MfS, HA II/10, no. 754, pp. 4–7.

³ For a general and profound introduction see J. Gieseke, *The History of the Stasi. East Germany's Secret Police, 1945–1990*, transl. D. Burnett (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

prisoners of war had left the country in 1955, carefully chosen East German representatives entered administrative and academic institutions in the USSR. The secret police services of the communist countries took part in choosing the delegates according to political criteria; however, the selection in advance did not satisfy them. They interlinked themselves to control the exchange of elites.

The story of the *Operativgruppe Moskau* starts in 1959, when the KGB discovered a leak in the Comecon permanent office. A GDR interpreter had smuggled protocols of council meetings to a US intelligence agency, most likely the CIA. The KGB remembered two Stasi case officers serving in Moscow – one of them had been in the Soviet capital since 1954, the other one followed in 1955, to watch diplomats and scientists who came from the GDR. The KGB made the two Stasi case officers search the flats and examine the belongings of the discovered agent and her comrades, while the Stasi sent further officers to the extensive interrogations of the interpreter in the Moscow remand prison. During this incident, the East Germans created their first documents entitled ‘Operativgruppe’.⁴ Although unintended, they thus created a role model for further Stasi outposts in other communist countries and for the other services’ respective representations in the GDR.

After the Comecon espionage incident, the Stasi Main Department for counterintelligence made the *Operativgruppe Moskau* a regular institution. It sent seven employees and – three years later – a highly ambitious head of the group to Moscow. From now on, the *Operativgruppe* systematically monitored GDR representatives in bilateral and multilateral organisations that were based in the Soviet Union. The most important ones were the GDR embassy, the trade mission, both the GDR representation and the multilateral office at Comecon, GDR firms and journalists of the East German media.⁵ It was not difficult for the officers to find collaborators, since some GDR representatives even offered their service on their own after being delegated to Moscow. The *Operativgruppe* watched scientists as well, especially in sensitive areas such as nuclear physics. It checked researchers at the joint Institute for Nuclear Physics of the communist countries in Dubna near Moscow against contacts with the Western world.⁶

⁴ BStU, MfS, HA II/10, no. 497, Hauptabteilung IX: Tagesmeldung über eingeleitete Untersuchungsvorgänge, Berlin, 11 Aug. 1959, pp. 1a–10a, and the following documents in this file.

⁵ BStU, MfS, HA II/10, no. 219, Hauptabteilung II, Abteilung 10: Arbeitsordnung der Operativgruppe der Hauptabteilung II in der UdSSR, Berlin, 1 July 1986, pp. 140–47.

⁶ BStU, MfS, HA XVIII, no. 2508, HA II, Operativgruppe: Plan des Einsatzes der Genossen der Operativgruppe Moskau der Linie XVIII, Moskau, 27 May 1968, pp. 6–8.

The surveillance of GDR students was a very broad task. In the face of the formal obligations of monitoring a total of 3,000 students,⁷ it seems unlikely that the group in Moscow managed to fulfil this task according to the officially set criteria of overall penetration. The group placed informers among GDR students. Many of them were already recruited during their classes in a special preparation school for foreign studies in the East German city of Halle.⁸ The most important motivation for the monitoring was cultural closure – especially contacts of GDR students with students from non-Eastern bloc countries were suspicious for the Stasi. The head of the group complained in 1982 about “unmonitorable contacts of suspicious character”.⁹ Nevertheless, for students who thought they were beyond the Stasi’s reach, careless political expressions or even a joyful lifestyle could still mean the end of their studies. In the concerned cases, the *Operativgruppe* sent reports to the headquarters in East Berlin. In the end, concerned regional Stasi departments decided upon the further careers of the students.

Both the Stasi headquarters and the GDR embassy in Moscow provided data of all GDR citizens, who were sent to the Soviet Union, to the *Operativgruppe*. In cooperation with the KGB, the Stasi officers examined their letters, private contacts and public expressions with a political character. The officers kept files of many GDR students, containing information about their motivation and their selection process. They founded small ‘working groups’ of two or three employees in Leningrad (from 1961 onwards) and Kiev (from 1987 onwards), since numerous GDR citizens studied in the two cities.

The *Operativgruppe* ensured its own continuous growth by acquiring new fields of control, according to the growing number of GDR citizens in the Soviet Union. After 200 telecommunication technicians were sent to various places in the Soviet Union in 1972, it proposed monitoring them. There is no evidence that this monitoring was, in fact, conducted.

However, when the construction works on the *Soyuz* gas pipeline started two years later, the Stasi headquarters saw the need to monitor the

⁷ BStU, MfS, HA II/10, no. 466, Botschaft der DDR in der UdSSR: Statistischer Meldebogen, 30 Sept. 1983, pp. 263–68; *ibid.*, no. 754, DDR-Bürger, die zeitweilig in der UdSSR leben, pp. 65–67.

⁸ See K.-A. Zech, “... nicht nur ein Förderinstitut”. *Mit der Arbeiter- und Bauern-Fakultät II Halle wurde vor 50 Jahren eine kommunistische Kadenschmiede gegründet* (Magdeburg: Harz Druckerei Wernigerode, 2004; Series: Sachbeiträge des LStU Sachsen-Anhalt 33), pp. 33–47.

⁹ BStU, MfS, HA II/10, no. 496, Operativgruppe Moskau: Einschätzung der politisch-operativen Lage, Moskau, 30 Oct. 1982, pp. 96–104 (here p. 99).

approximately 4000 construction workers from the GDR.¹⁰ Here, the high economic relevance and the project's propagandistic importance might have been the deciding factor. However, the vast geographical scope of the pipeline and the isolation of some GDR construction sites made monitoring the workers difficult. Furthermore, the high pressure on recruiting GDR youngsters to work nonstop for whole months under severe conditions in the USSR made it difficult for the Stasi to intervene if so-called 'Anti-Soviet' comments or excessive partying among the workers became known.

The work of the *Operativgruppe* also contained military observation. Officially, it spied upon GDR pupils of the Soviet military academies; however, it also maintained close contact with the East German military attaché.¹¹ Furthermore, it collaborated with the KGB in actions that were planned and approved by the counterintelligence and the economic departments. There was also case-related assistance to the local and regional KGB departments. Here, the secret police services cooperated in suppressing underground political activists, nonconformists in religious and peace movements and independent songwriters.

The lion's share of joint operations with the KGB was East German support in counterintelligence against West German services – Stasi officers monitored suspicious persons by the KGB order.¹² During one operation, an officer from the *Operativgruppe* sought to entrap a West German art smuggler by posing as a fake West German buyer.¹³

Since the *Operativgruppe* was expected to be active on different fields, it was composed of Stasi officers from several Stasi departments. The Stasi Main Department for counterintelligence (Main Department II) took the lead management of the *Operativgruppe*. Officers from the Stasi departments for controlling the economy (Main Department XVIII) and the army (Main Department I) were part of the *Operativgruppe*. Officers from the intelligence department, Main Directorate A (*Hauptverwaltung A*) belonged in a way to the *Operativgruppe*, but most probably they acted

¹⁰ BStU, MfS, BdL/Dok., no. 1937, Befehl no. 33/74 des Ministers (für Staatssicherheit, Erich Mielke) vom 19.11.1974 über die "Politisch-operative Sicherung des Abschnittes der DDR beim Bau der Erdgasleitung Orenburg – Westgrenze UdSSR".

¹¹ BStU, MfS, HA I, no. 18125, Hauptabteilung I, Leiter: Einsatz eines zweiten operativen Mitarbeiters der Hauptabteilung I bei der Operativgruppe der Hauptabteilung II in Moskau, pp. 120–21; *ibid.*, Abteilung Äußere Abwehr: Aktenvermerk über die Absprache mit dem Leiter der HA II/10 und dem Leiter der OPG Moskau, Berlin, 18 Feb. 1987, *ibid.*, pp. 77–78. Cf. also W. Richter, *Der Militärische Nachrichtendienst der Nationalen Volksarmee der DDR und seine Kontrolle durch das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit. Die Geschichte eines deutschen Geheimdienstes* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 232–38.

¹² See the working plans of the Section 1 of Hauptabteilung II/10: BStU, MfS, HA II/10, no. 219, pp. 170–79 (1989), 231–39 (1988), and 240–47 (1987).

¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 494, pp. 282 and 298.

more autonomously. In 1986, thirteen officers of the *Operativgruppe* belonged to Main Department II, four to Main Directorate A, three to Main Department XVIII and one to Main Department I. The officers from Main Department II had a network of 88 unofficial informers at their disposal in 1989, and some additional confidential persons.

To support communication, couriers operated between the Stasi headquarters in Berlin and the Moscow *Operativgruppe*, using charter and regular flights.

Looking at everyday life, difficulties to adapt 'internationalism' show up on the level of working contacts. Although the *Operativgruppe* used office spaces, private apartments and safe houses (German: *konspirative Wohnung*, or conspiratorial apartment) of the KGB,¹⁴ everyday contacts were not as tight as one might expect in a so-called 'brotherhood' of the services. Cooperation partners and liaison officers were administratively pre-defined, and the Stasi files neither reveal a high number of collective gatherings, nor many private contacts between Stasi and KGB officers. Instead, there were Stasi complaints – first, about the level of the working contacts and, secondly, about the condition of the KGB infrastructure.

After the Stasi had gradually emancipated itself from the KGB in the 1980s, the *Operativgruppe Moscow* was not satisfied anymore with its status as a *de facto* regional Stasi department abroad that had operational, but not representative duties. In an internal Stasi paper, the *Operativgruppe* head Gerhard Hempel complained that KGB seniors would treat the *Operativgruppe* dismissively and that they would shift the contacts down to lower levels in the KGB hierarchy. He proposed direct information flows to the KGB via the *Operativgruppe*, developing his unit into a foreign Stasi representation.¹⁵ However, this would have brought the *Operativgruppe* into competition with the KGB's East German headquarters at Berlin-Karlshorst, which the Stasi headquarters did not allow – it refused the proposal. Obviously, it considered Hempel not to have understood the sensitivity of asymmetrical cooperation with the KGB anymore.¹⁶ One year later, Hempel was ordered back to East Berlin, after a shorter duration of duty than his predecessors. These events do not necessarily indicate that the KGB treated the Stasi officers in an arrogant manner. They can also be interpreted as an outcome of growing and dissatisfied Stasi self-confidence.

¹⁴ Ibid., no. 27756, HA II, Abt. 14, OGM: Materiell-technische Sicherstellung der OGM durch das KfS, Moskau, 16 March 1984, pp. 4–7.

¹⁵ Ibid., HA II, Abt. 14, OGM: Organisatorische Formen der Zusammenarbeit mit dem KfS unter Berücksichtigung des Status der OGM, Moskau, 16 March 1984, pp. 8–10.

¹⁶ Ibid., HA II, no. 20947, HA II/14: Absprache des Leiters der HA II zu Grundproblemen der Arbeit der Operativgruppe Moskau am 18.4.1984, Berlin, 23 Apr. 1984, pp. 31–34.

Other Stasi complaints concerned the infrastructure provided by the KGB. Obviously, there was a cultural clash between what was habitual in East Germany and in Russia. The *Operativgruppe* frequently addressed a malfunctioning of the heating in its offices and criticised Soviet cars and the KGB drivers. Private apartments were not considered well enough equipped, so the *Operativgruppe* ordered its own interior via the Berlin headquarters. Safe houses were said to be too far in the outskirts of Moscow, making meetings hard to conduct.¹⁷ The bad supply of food and consumer goods, as well as the Russian mentality, were subjects of further complaint and sources for homesickness. An *Operativgruppe* officer wrote to a friend in the headquarters that colleagues and other GDR functionaries would like to leave because of Moscow's living conditions. According to him, the phrase "my wife cannot stand it anymore" was often to be heard. The officer himself – he was married to a Russian – wrote he was happy in Moscow. For a Russian friend, he ordered eyeglasses from the GDR via the economics department of the Stasi in East Berlin.¹⁸

Conclusions

The cross-national interweaving of communist elites after Stalin's death required – in the perception of the secret police services – cooperation in surveillance over their own citizens abroad and over international institutions. When the Soviet bloc started its first attempts of multinational integration, the KGB realised early on the need for such cooperation even inside the USSR's borders – and allowed the Stasi to come in for practical reasons. The interweaving of communist elites impacted the architecture of secret police cooperation. Soon, the *Operativgruppe Moskau* was a part of a wide-spread system of legal foreign liaison offices of the secret police services inside the Eastern bloc.

Beyond the universal adviser function of the KGB in regard to its satellite services from the very beginning on, the installation of this system in the 1950s and 1960s marks the starting point of horizontal cooperation at the working level. In this entanglement of control, the principle of territorial sovereignty was taken back in favour of the principle of citizenship – every secret police service was issued the right to spy on

¹⁷ Ibid., no. 259, HA II/10, OG Moskau: Gesprächsvermerk, Moskau, 4 May 1987, pp. 178–180; HA II, Abt. 14, OGM: Materiell-technische Sicherstellung.

¹⁸ BStU, MfS, HA XVIII, no. 2598, letter of Major Dr. Wunsch to OSL Matthes, Moskau, 5 Nov. 1980, pp. 35–38; *ibid.*, letter of Walter Wunsch to Dieter Maye, Moskau, March 1975, pp. 15–16.

citizens that it considered as ‘their own’. Thus the Stasi extended its claim to monitor and control GDR citizens beyond the GDR’s borders.

The organisational development of the *Operativgruppe Moskau* demonstrates that it kept pace with the interweaving of elites, systematically monitoring all GDR institutions in the Soviet Union against suspicious Western contacts. However, it failed in regard to the pluralisation of lifestyles and of culture, which were difficult to grasp in its terms of ‘political-ideological diversion’ and ‘underground political activity’. As could be seen in the cases of students and construction workers, the field was too wide and suspicious practice too difficult to define.

In the network of their foreign liaison offices, the services ‘exercised’ cooperation in on-site working relations. Although named *Operativgruppe*, the Moscow Stasi outpost’s most important task was the monitoring of GDR citizens. Its main goal was surveillance, while common operations with the KGB had secondary significance. The small-range common operations resembled test balloons, while highly sensitive operations were conducted using other cooperation mechanisms. The services did not direct sensitive information through the channels of the operative groups.

The national predisposition of the secret police employees made cooperation difficult on the practical level. National institutional structures, national closure as the guiding principle for creating security, the related culture of suspicion and the dogma of conspiracy marked barriers to the everyday cooperation of the services. For many officers, language problems and the lack of experience of cultural diversity were hindrances. The perspective on everyday life and culture of secret police cooperation shows a world of rigid structures and non-exchange that is – in our time context – hard to imagine. Thus, the most puzzling outcome is that many Stasi officers and their families did actually not want to live in the centre of Soviet power due to isolation and different living conditions, and some simply were not interested in or open to foreign cultures. Other actors of state socialist integration most probably developed closer contacts to their respective counterparts than the secret police officers did. As it was shown in the example of the KGB and the Stasi, the entanglements between the services did not only generate the intended cross-border surveillance, but also personal self-delimitation and private separation of the employees.

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Obserwacja nadążająca za integrującymi się elitami: 'Grupa Operacyjna Moskwa' wschodnioniemieckiej Stasi

Streszczenie: Artykuł omawia współpracę między wschodnioniemiecką Stasi a KGB. Skupia się na Grupie Operacyjnej Stasi w ZSRR („Operativgruppe Moskau”), działającej od połowy lat pięćdziesiątych w celu monitorowania obywateli wschodnioniemieckich w ZSRR. Praca przygląda się rozwojowi przedstawicielstwa Stasi i rosnącemu zakresowi jego działań, opisuje działania i ograniczenia wynikające zarówno z mentalności oficerów Stasi, jak i z podporządkowanej pozycji przedstawicielstwa Stasi we współpracy między oboma aparatami bezpieczeństwa. Przedstawia „Operativgruppe Moskau” jako wyraz roszczenia Stasi do prawa kontrolowania obywateli NRD poza granicami kraju

oraz jako ogólny element międzynarodowego systemu inwigilacji w bloku wschodnim powstałego w następstwie zacieśniających się kontaktów pomiędzy europejskimi krajami obozu socjalistycznego i ich obywatelami.

Słowa kluczowe: komunistyczne tajne służby, Stasi, KGB, współpraca tajnych służb, inwigilacja obywateli za granicą

Christian Domnitz (1975–2015), dr, historyk i dziennikarz. Studiował historię, politologię i ekonomię na Uniwersytecie Humboldta w Berlinie oraz Uniwersytecie Karola w Pradze. W 2003 r. obronił pracę magisterską, w ramach której wykorzystał metody analizy dyskursu historycznego do badania roli czechosłowackich dekretów prezydenckich w debacie parlamentarnej. Odbiwał kweryndy badawcze i stypendia naukowe w instytutach historycznych w Poczdamie, Moguncji, Kolonii, Berlinie i Warszawie. Wykształcenie i doświadczenie dziennikarskie zdobywał w Berlinie oraz na stypendium dziennikarskim w Kijowie. W 2011 r. uzyskał doktorat na podstawie pracy o proeuropejskiej reorientacji opinii publicznej w krajach obozu socjalistycznego w latach 1975–1989, w której porównał dyskursy na temat Europy w socjalistycznej Polsce, Czechosłowacji i NRD. W latach 2011–2015 był badaczem w agencji Federalnego Komisarza ds. Archiwów Stasi (BStU), gdzie badał stałe przedstawicielstwa Stasi („grupy operacyjne”) w innych krajach obozu socjalistycznego. Na jesieni 2015 r. rozpoczął długoterminowe stypendium badawcze w Niemieckim Instytucie Historycznym w Warszawie. Zmarł w listopadzie 2015 r.

Opublikował wiele artykułów poświęconych historii Europy Środkowej, historii kultury oraz ideom europejskim do roku 1989, a także książki: *Die Beneš-Dekrete in parlamentarischer Debatte. Kontroversen im Europäischen Parlament und im tschechischen Abgeordnetenhaus vor dem EU-Beitritt der Tschechischen Republik* (Berlin–Münster 2007; książka ukazała się również w języku czeskim: *Zápas o Benešovy dekrety před vstupem do Evropské unie. Diskuse v Evropském parlamentu a v poslanecké sněmovně Parlamentu ČR v letech 2002–2003*, Praha 2007); *Europa im Ostblock. Vorstellungen und Diskurse (1945–1991)* (współredakcja z Jose M. Faraldo i Pauliną Gulinską-Jurgiel, Kolonia 2008); *Hinwendung nach Europa: Öffentlichkeitswandel im Staatssozialismus 1975–1989* (Bochum 2015; wydanie polskie ukazuje się w 2021 roku); *Kooperation und Kontrolle. Die Arbeit der Stasi-Operativgruppen im sozialistischen Ausland* (we współpracy z Moniką Tantzsch; Getynga 2016).

Abstract: This paper deals with the collaboration between the East German Stasi and the KGB. It focuses on the Stasi outpost in the USSR, the *Operativgruppe Moskau*, which functioned since the mid-1950s to monitor East German citizens in the USSR. It examines the development and the expanding scope of this Stasi outpost, outlines its activities and describes its limits, which were caused

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both by the mentality of the Stasi officers and the subordinate role of the Stasi outpost within the collaboration of the two secret services. The *Operativgruppe Moskau* is seen as an expression of the Stasi's claim to control GDR citizens even beyond the GDR's borders, and in general as an element of the cross-border surveillance in the Eastern bloc, following the growing exchange between the European socialist countries and its citizens.

Keywords: communist secret services, Stasi, KGB, cooperation of secret services, surveillance of citizens abroad

Christian Domnitz (1975–2015), PhD, historian and journalist. He studied history, politics and economics at the Berlin Humboldt University, including studies at the Prague Charles University. In 2003, he wrote his Master's Thesis entitled 'The Czechoslovak Presidential Decrees in Parliamentary Debate – a Historical Discourse Analysis'. He conducted research and held short-term research fellowships at institutes of history in Potsdam, Mainz, Cologne, Berlin, and Warsaw; gained a journalistic education and practice in Berlin, including a journalistic fellowship in Kiev. In 2011, he received his PhD with a thesis 'Turning towards Europe. Reorientation and change in public opinion under state socialism 1975–1989', in which he compared discourses about Europe in socialist Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR. In 2011–2015, he was a researcher at the agency of the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records (BStU), writing about the permanent Stasi outposts (*Operativgruppen*) in other socialist countries. In autumn 2015, he started a long-term research fellowship at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw. He died in November 2015.

He is the author of numerous articles on Central European history, cultural history, and European ideas before 1989, as well as the following books: *Die Beneš-Dekrete in parlamentarischer Debatte. Kontroversen im Europäischen Parlament und im tschechischen Abgeordnetenhaus vor dem EU-Beitritt der Tschechischen Republik* (Berlin–Münster, 2007), also in Czech: *Zápas o Benešovy dekrety před vstupem do Evropské unie. Diskuse v Evropském parlamentu a v poslanecké sněmovně Parlamentu ČR v letech 2002–2003* (Praha, 2007); as co-editor with Jose M. Faraldo and Paulina Gulinska-Jurgiel: *Europa im Ostblock. Vorstellungen und Diskurse (1945–1991)* (Köln, 2008); *Hinwendung nach Europa: Öffentlichkeitswandel im Staatssozialismus 1975–1989* (Bochum, 2015), a Polish version will appear in 2021; with Monika Tantzsch, *Kooperation und Kontrolle. Die Arbeit der Stasi-Operativgruppen im sozialistischen Ausland* (Göttingen, 2016).