

Thomson, Henry. *Watching the Watchers: Communist Elites, The Secret Police and Social Order in Cold War Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024

*Angelica Krystel von Kumberg**
Stanford University, United States

Introduction

Henry Thomson, an Associate Professor in the School of Politics and Global Studies at Arizona State University, brings to the fore a novel theoretical and empirical framework exploring how authoritarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe managed their secret police forces, delving into the specific dynamics of elite cohesion and coercive capacity in socialist dictatorships from 1945 to 1989. In his new book *Watching the Watchers: Communist Elites, the Secret Police and Social Order in Cold War Europe*, Thomson builds on foundational theories of scholars like Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965) and Arendt (1966), poignantly expanding on these works to investigate empirical as well as qualitative and comparative frameworks to tackle an intriguingly complex question: *Why did the size and activities of security agencies vary so much within different countries under the communist dictatorships of Cold War Central and Eastern Europe post-Stalin?*

Most significantly, Thomson powerfully creates a comprehensive framework to unpack the paradox of the Secret police; both “vital for enforcing social order and safeguarding autocrats’ power,” as well as “pos[ing] an inherent threat to their masters.” (Thomson, 2024, 3) The author advocates a top-down theory to explain the dynamics of elite cohesion, coercive capacity, and authoritarianism. For him authoritarian regimes are not “monolithic, utility maximizing actors but...groups of self-interested individuals who struggle to pursue common goals.” (Thomson, 2024, 88) The author argues that the size and activities of coercive institutions, such as secret police agencies, were significantly influenced by the cohesion of the ruling elite. This cohesion was disrupted by the death of Josef Stalin in 1953, culminating in a series of divergent paths in different countries. The book posits that where post-Stalinist transitions occurred, elite cohesion disintegrated at different stages, resulting in reduced coercive capacity and increased social disorder. In contrast, countries where Stalinist leaders retained power coercive capacity either remained the same or increased further. Thomson highlights how large secret

*Corresponding author: e-mail: akvk@stanford.edu

police agencies enabled by cohesive ruling elites maintained order in East Germany, Romania and Bulgaria, while the opposite occurred in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland. (Thomson, 2024, 87–88) For instance, the author reflects how a post-Stalinist transition in Poland, marked by the replacement of Bolesław Bierut with Władysław Gomułka in 1956, led to significant disruptions in elite cohesion resulting in a reduction of the regime's coercive capabilities. In contrast, the ongoing Stalinist coalition in East Germany under Walter Ulbricht, despite a nationwide uprising in 1953, "never broke from their repressive playbook." (Thomson, 2024, 93) This Stalinist continuity allowed for the consolidation and growth of the Stasi, which maintained social order through extensive surveillance and preemptive repression.

Watching the Watchers is divided into three distinct parts. The initial chapters lay out the theoretical foundation, discussing how elite cohesion impacts coercive capacity and, consequently, social order. The author provides a detailed explanation of how ruling coalitions' ability to monitor and control their coercive agents is crucial for maintaining stability. This section is essential for readers interested in understanding how elite cohesion impacts coercive capacity and social order. Part II offers a comparative historical analysis of Poland and East Germany, illustrating how the nature of post-Stalinist transitions influenced the cohesion of communist elites and their ability to build effective coercive institutions. The author contrasts Poland's failure to establish a capable secret police, with East Germany's more repressive trajectory. This part is particularly valuable for readers interested in these specific historical cases and the causal links connecting elite cohesion to declining coercive capacity. Part III uses quantitative data to test the theoretical framework from Chapter 2 and extends this analysis to the broader region. Using a difference-in-differences research design leveraging variation in external authority and elite cohesion caused by Stalin's death, Thomson analyzes hundreds of members of the ruling coalitions in socialist Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania between 1945 and 1989. Here, the author quantitatively examines the impact of post-Stalinist transitions on coercive capacity across the six countries to demonstrate that these transitions resulted in shorter tenures for secret police chiefs and reduced the number of officers and informants. The book concludes with appendices including information on the institutional development of the secret police agencies, leaders, data sources and models appertaining to Part III.

While the book is comprehensive, a deeper exploration of pre-existing institutional legacies and the role of external influences like the Soviet Union's changing policies and a broader appreciation for how foreign policy affects the domestic realm could have enriched the narrative. In Chapter 7, for instance, Thomson effectively analyzes whether declining authority of external state-builders negatively impacts intra-elite cohesion and whether this fragmentation of elite cohesion leads to increasingly frequent sanctions of secret police chiefs,

and not Defense Ministers (who are still under Soviet control). (Thomson, 2024, 222) This information is mainly provided through an empirical lens and could have benefited from a more thorough historical grounding. Additionally, a deeper comparative analysis with non-communist authoritarian regimes may further illuminate the generalizability of some of these findings for future studies.

To conclude, Thomson has provided a meticulously researched study that sheds new light on the functioning and dysfunction of authoritarianism, specifically the granular differences and stages of evolution throughout time between coercive institutions in contrasting authoritarian regimes. The book makes several significant contributions, including a theoretical framework linking elite cohesion to coercive capacity and social order, enriching today's theoretical discourse on authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, the empirically driven evidence supported by qualitative methods and micro-historical accounts of Poland and East Germany, offer an effective comparative perspective and new insights into the political dynamics and decision-making processes within these regimes. *Watching the Watchers* is a valuable resource for scholars of history, political science, and those interested in unpacking the intricacies of specific authoritarian regimes as well as the nature of coercive institutions. Moreover, Thomson's findings have significant implications for understanding authoritarian regimes beyond Central and Eastern Europe. The theoretical framework provided in this book could also be applied to other case studies, such as China "before and during the Cultural Revolution," (Thomson, 2024, 265) and possibly other areas of the world where the entwined layers of elite cohesion and coercive capacity remain at the core of regime stability.

