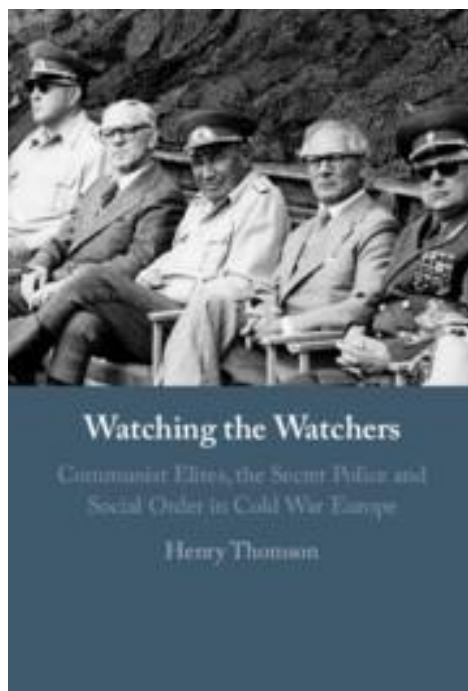


REVIEWS AND NOTES

Henry Thomson, (2024), *Who Watches the Watchers. Communist Elites, the Secret Police and Social Order in Cold War Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 339 pp. presented by Mihaela TEODOR*



Henry Thomson, an accomplished political economist expert specializing in economic development and political transitions, published earlier in 2024, at Cambridge University Press its latest volume *Who Watches the Watchers. Communist Elites, the Secret Police and Social Order in Cold War Europe*, which is a compelling exploration

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of the “guardianship dilemma in authoritarian regimes”, as other reviewers stated.

The author currently serves as an Associate Professor in the School of Politics and Global Studies at Arizona State University with a research focus on economic development, authoritarian rule, and transitions to democracy. He completed his Ph.D. in Political Science at the University of Minnesota (See more on <https://search.asu.edu/profile/3140896>). His research continues to contribute valuable insights into the dynamics of authoritarian regimes and their transitions to democracy¹.

The book *Who Watches the Watchers* dives into the intricate relationship between communist elites and secret police agencies during the Cold War. The book has a linear structure with: four parts (Part I. Introduction and Theory; Part II. Comparative Historical Analysis; Part III. Cross-National Quantitative Analysis; Part IV. Conclusion), nine chapters (1. Introduction; 2. Theory; 3. Introduction to part II; 4. The Polish People’s Republic; 5. The German Democratic Republic; 6. Introduction to part III; 7. Elite cohesion and coercive agent tenure; 8. Officers and secret informants; 9. Conclusion), and three appendices (A: Secret police agencies and chiefs; B: Survival analysis; C: Agency size analysis). Thus, the volume highlights the importance of elite cohesion in maintaining control over coercive agents and preventing potential threats to the regime’s survival².

Thomson emphasizes the pivotal role of elite cohesion in shaping the trajectory of authoritarian regimes. A high degree of elite cohesion enables the regime to maintain control over coercive institutions, thereby facilitating the expansion of state capacity to implement policies,

¹ He has authored two books: *Who Watches the Watchers: Communist Elites, the Secret Police and Social Order in Cold War Europe* (2024) and *Food and Power: Regime Type, Agricultural Policy and Political Stability* (2019). Source: <https://search.asu.edu/profile/3140896>.

² Read more about the volume *Who Watches the Watchers: Communist Elites, the Secret Police and Social Order in Cold War Europe* (2024) on <https://www.cambridge.org/no/universitypress/subjects/politics-international-relations/russian-and-east-european-government-politics-and-policy/watching-watchers-communist-elites-secret-police-and-social-order-cold-war-europe?format=HB>

oversee security forces, and allocate resources to enhance coercive capabilities, and the capacity for the suppression of dissent. Intra-elite divisions can impede the regime's ability to effectively oversee coercive agents, resulting in constraints on the expansion of secret police forces. His cross-national statistical analyses further reinforce his arguments, demonstrating how elite cohesion influences the tenure and growth of security officials, staff, and informants.

Through detailed case studies of East Germany and Poland, Thomson traces the causal pathways that explain variations in the stability and effectiveness of coercive institutions. In this respect, Thomson looks at what happened after Stalin died to understand how leadership changes can affect authoritarian regimes. Thomson tests this argument with an innovative multi-method research design, including difference-in-differences analysis and comparative historical case studies. He provides a nuanced understanding of the coercive capacity of Communist dictatorships in Eastern and Central Europe, starting with a simple idea: dictators must rely on coercive agents for repression, but doing so creates a problem, the coercive agents themselves can become a threat to the dictator's survival. Thomson's multi-method research design offers a sophisticated analysis of the complex relationship between dictators and their coercive agents in Communist regimes. Henry Thomson explores the differences in the coercive capacity of Communist dictatorships in Eastern and Central Europe, the book being a deep dive into the mechanisms of control and surveillance employed by authoritarian regimes in this region. Thus, the author offers readers a nuanced understanding of how these states maintained social order through coercive means.

In conclusion, the author leverages his expertise in political economy to dissect the interplay between elite cohesion and the coercive capabilities of the state. The volume provides both strong theoretical foundations and robust empirical evidence. Thomson's work constitutes a significant contribution to the scholarly literature on authoritarian politics. Moreover, *Who Watches the Watchers. Communist Elites, the Secret Police and Social Order in Cold War Europe* is essential reading for understanding authoritarian politics in Cold War Europe.