

Remembering History

German Representations of the Stasi's Legacy in Fiction and Memory

Written by Cody Ritter

Honours Thesis for MLCS

Supervised by Dr. Adam Takács

Winter 2023

Introduction

History is widely acknowledged as a living entity constantly shaping individuals, their societies, and their cultural perspectives. Yet having something merely occur in the past does not make it history. Rather, history is a *subject* of study, a social creation formed from what has come to be known as the historiographical operation. Past experiences prior to becoming apart of social histories are first products of memory, and although these two elements inform one another, they are not the same. By looking at the past outside of the historical institution's representations a great deal of information is found preserved that informs the broader social consciousness. Themes, issues, and events from lived experiences emerge as common tropes within social productions and the chosen incorporations act to give meaning and interpretation to such aspects of the past while keeping them relevant in public discourses, both parallel to and in conjunction with the narratives emerging from the modern-day historical institution. Memory has, and will continue to have, a major impact on what meaning is attributed to past experiences particularly with regards to moments of trauma. Germany's perspectives on the twentieth century are of particular notoriety here, precisely due to Germany's role in bringing about and being subjected to such traumas.

The role which surveillance and enforced conformity have had in shaping the current perspectives and reflections on the German past will provide the basis of this analysis. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's film *The Lives of Others* is a valuable representative of how entertainment and fictional depictions of the past can be used to broach subjects and experiences important to the formation of social memories affecting the present. By utilizing historical references and accounts, the fictional depictions reveal clear connections to lived

experiences in a medium and style more accessible to the wider public, which, in turn, shapes such social memories and opinions. By meandering through a fictional narrative, the connections between history, memory, and fiction can be brought to light and aid in understanding how societal mythmaking and awareness through interpretations and representations of social memories are developed alongside and outside academic narratives.

Prelude: The Historians' Controversy

Traumatic experiences require processing and interpretation, and Germany's twentieth century is no different. Following the total defeat of the Third Reich, Germans were left facing an identity crisis and laden with a heavy guilt for the atrocities committed under the direction of the recent leadership. Following the occupation and denazification initiatives of the allied victors and Germany's division into the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), many would be left with questions as to what went wrong. As new generations came of age, a process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or coming to terms with the past, began entering the realm of public discourse, particularly in West Germany.¹ The initial apathy held towards the memories of the past by the war generation would give way to their children seeking to understand their inherited legacy.

Peter Caldwell and Karrin Hanshew point to the 1970s as a foundational period in what would end up becoming West Germany's Historians' Quarrel/Controversy (Historikerstreit). By this time, a new generation of teachers and historians trained in the sixties were beginning to move into prominence within society, while simultaneously bringing the "history of the

¹ Mary Fulbrook, *A History of Germany 1918-2014: The Divided Nation*, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 248.

Holocaust into the classroom.” This launched an important journey of self-discovery, made all the more effective by not having been imposed from the outside. The resulting exploration delved into the German past even, at times, against the wishes of parents. Hitherto, the prevailing narrative circulating German societies sought to pass off the Nazi crimes as actions of the leadership, leaving society at large clinging to “narratives of ignorance, innocence, and resistance.” But after the American Holocaust miniseries was aired on television in 1979, with an estimated half the adult population tuning in to watch every night, the Holocaust officially entered the mainstream becoming a subject of discussion and eventually, debate. Interestingly, the airing was always followed by “a special historians’ ‘hotline’” allowing viewers to call-in and weigh-in. This resulted in an overwhelming number of questions along with angry comments in what could only be described as a collision of social history with social memories. By airing the miniseries, the past was brought into the realm of public discourse and thus, the journey towards uncovering the true complexities of Germany’s Nazi past began. The simplistic “black and white” narratives were replaced, with a new colour pallet revealing complexity and moral shades of grey.²

The eighties marked a major turning point where this “desire and willingness to confront the past” began shifting towards an aim to “reappropriate and ‘normalize’ twentieth-century German history.”³ By this time, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl was trying to revitalize a “bright side” to German history because he saw a certain lack of “attachment” in young people to their homeland behind the recent years of social unrest and terrorism. The inability

² Peter C. Caldwell and Karrin Hanshew, *Germany since 1945: Politics, Culture, and Society* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 231.

³ Fulbrook, *A History of Germany*, 248.

to “feel proud as Germans” was seen as a major contributing factor to the social unrest which had come to define the past decade and a half. Although he did not go so far as to try and ignore the Nazi past, he did attempt to delineate between it and the present Germany. This attempt at reinterpreting German history and its affects on German society subsequently opened the door for further interpretations, bringing with it a historians’ controversy which debated the uniqueness of Nazi crimes, and the Holocaust specifically.⁴

This Historikerstreit began out of discussions over how the German and Nazi past should be viewed, and what role it should continue to have in defining German identity. In addition to the above approach taken by Kohl was the analysis by historian Ernst Nolte who argued that Germany actually “copied rather than originated the camp system” from the Soviet gulags which was incidentally far more horrific. Such a postulation was seen by Jürgen Habermas as a whitewashing of Nazi crimes and sparked a debate that would be carried out via responses in two newspapers and include around twenty historians. This discussion regarding the uniqueness of the Holocaust would provoke long lasting public debate as well, and spew outside the academic world.⁵

The uniqueness of Nazi crimes is premised not just on the number of those effected, but in the nature in which the state violence was perpetrated. These aspects combined to differentiate the Nazi crimes from other atrocities which may have affected a similar, or even greater, number of victims. The debate regarding the Holocaust’s uniqueness was a necessary process that saw it shift from being an event in the past to one with meaning as ascribed by

⁴ Caldwell and Hanshew, *Germany Since 1945*, 231-232.

⁵ Caldwell and Hanshew, 232.

German society itself. Richard von Weizsäcker of the German conservative party (CDU) is quoted by Caldwell and Hanshew in what captures the essence of how this past and the end of the Second World War has largely come to be remembered. Weizsäcker saw the war's end as something that ought not to be seen as "a day for Germans to celebrate" due to the accompanying experiences with death, invasion, destruction, and the disappearance of many Prisoners of War from society, but it also importantly marked "the end of an aberration in German history." Such a perception allowed for the "'liberation' from dictatorship" to not extend to a freedom from the responsibility of the atrocities, nor the guilt which accompanied the genocide committed "in the name of Germany." Instead, Weizsäcker vocalized the need for Germans to move forward and attempt to come to terms with such a past in order to "learn to live together" and to keep the past from repeating itself.⁶ Although allied powers attempted to "denazify" the defeated German, it was only after new generations of Germans came to question the legacy which they had inherited from their forefathers that the society shifted from repressing past memories and experiences toward analysing and unpacking such narratives, allowing differing narratives to emerge and the subsequent debate to shape broader perspectives and understandings for the common social experiences.

This controversy is a prime example of the role which the past has on present conceptions and realities. From the interjections following the Holocaust miniseries on the *historian's hotline* to the debates being carried out through newspaper entries, interpretations and meanings attributed to the past were coming to play a major role in how Germans saw

⁶ Caldwell and Hanshew, *Germany Since 1945*, 233.

themselves in the present. The mere fact that such reflections took until the eighties to enter the realm of public debate should not come as a surprise either, for, as will be seen and has already been stated, simply happening does not itself result in an event becoming incorporated into a societal history. Rather, history and memory are both processes reliant on narrativization and are used as a means of explaining the world, both past and present. An analysis looking into the differences between the historiographical process and its relation to memory can therefore aid in pinpointing the importance which temporality has in shaping societal perspectives on events from the past and subsequently distinguishing the unique importance memory and fictional works play in shaping the societal consciousness.

History, Memory, and Fiction

Before looking any further into the intricate interconnectedness between memory, history, and society, some preliminary analyses are needed. This means distinguishing between how the historiographical operation differs from memory and such an undertaking is best done with the aid of Paul Ricoeur and Jörn Rüsen. Ricoeur underlines three categorical processes making up the “historiographical operation” including “documentary proof, explanation/understanding, and the historian’s representation.”⁷ Rüsen echoes this by emphasizing the dual nature within historiography by parroting an idea first coined by Leopold von Ranke. He quotes Ranke stating how “History is a science in collecting, finding, [and] penetrating; it is an art because it recreates and portrays that which it has found and recognized.”⁸ Such an art and science outlook manages to correlate with Ricoeur’s own

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 325.

⁸ Jörn Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning: A Theory of Historical Studies*, trans. Diane Kerns and Katie Digan (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 146.

definition, and the combined attributes of these foundational elements mirror one another. From such a basis, history and memory can be distinguished allowing for a subsequent appraisal of the importance and incorporation of memory into fictions.

Memory can be seen as representing the “art” side of the historiographical process. This emphasizes the products origin in creation, often lacking the foundational element of verifiability in what Ricoeur termed as *documentation* or, as Rüsen describes its *scientific* elements. Rüsen argues that it is from the “scientific validity of historical knowledge,” which itself is based upon presenting “empirically grounded data into temporal structures” through the use of “historical narratives,” that history as an institution is distinguished above that of mere opinion.⁹ Such a “[m]ethod substantiates knowledge by making its assertions verifiable,” and in so doing, provides the foundations for trust and respectability.¹⁰ Being verifiable, however, is not enough, since it is only through understanding and logical explanations that the historiographical process is brought about.

Since records and documentation all tend to be from an individual or particular standpoint, a historian is faced with the issue of interpreting between these variances while striving to achieve impartiality or objectivity. For Ricoeur, the discipline of History attempts to form out of such a “collection of particular histories,” a connection within the “unlimited multiplicity of individual memories and the plurality of collective memories” into a singular entity or “subject.”¹¹ Here, memory is explicitly labelled as a singular part of what comes to

⁹ Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning*, 32-33.

¹⁰ Rüsen, 34.

¹¹ Ricoeur, *Memory History, Forgetting*, 299.

form history as a whole, but in isolation it lacks what history does not: refinement and verifiability. The question of temporality thus becomes important in being able to achieve some level of understanding, for as time goes on, the potential impacts and connections traceable to a single event can increase or become clearer.

When considering the question of temporality in relation to history and memory, Rüsen observes how “[t]he past itself is not yet history; it becomes history by the activity of the human mind.”¹² Although “memory made or kept the past alive in the present, history made the past distant through temporal difference,” allowing it a distinct “quality of otherness.”¹³ So there exists a purgatory between history and experience, with memory acting as caretaker. Ricoeur comments on this further when discussing the issues that *contemporary histories* pose to the historian. Here, analysis is inherently difficult due to the unfinished nature of the archival work. With eyewitnesses still living and contributing to the archive, the “interpretation and the quest for truth” becomes increasingly complicated.¹⁴ The closer one moves to historical events the cloudier the relations between history and memory become. Hence why *understanding* and *documentation* are not the only two dimensions of the historiographical process but underscore the importance of *representation*.

Only by having history represented in “the form of *narratives*” [emphasis added] can it be used to help explain the chaos of existence.¹⁵ Narratives are tied to representation and thus lead to the final distinguishing aspect of the historiographical operation as defined by Ricoeur.

¹² Jörn Rüsen, “Tradition: A Principle of Historical Sense-Generation and Its Logic and Effect in Historical Culture” *History and Theory* 51, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): 47, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2303.2012.00646.x.

¹³ Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning*, 171.

¹⁴ Ricoeur, 336.

¹⁵ Rüsen, “Tradition,” 47.

Representation and narrativization are important elements here as they allow data and information of past experiences to be effectively communicated in meaningful ways. This allows people a sense of “historical orientation in [their] daily lives.”¹⁶ Both historical narratives and those of fiction or memory utilize imagination to “transcend the facts” and create “meaning” both “accessible and communicable” so to “bridge the gap between past and present.”¹⁷ So, as a means of communicating meaningful messages to the audience of the present, the choice of what information can and should be included in the deliberation of passing a verdict comes into play. This process is juxtaposed in Ricoeur’s comparison of a historian and a judge. Both are described as masters at “exposing fakes” and “in the manipulation of suspicion” but while the judge passes “judgement,” the historian seeks to contribute to “an unending process of revision.”¹⁸ The difference between these two roles helps delineate between history and memory. For even though both act to utilize imagination, memory inherently is inhibited by contextual limitations when trying to determine the impact of an event and be utilized to orientate the social consciousness. A historian’s explanation, on the other hand, can drag on unceasingly and is limited only by the continuing availability of evidence and interpretation.

Even though memory is inhibited by such contextual limitations, there remain some distinct stages of memory as defined by Rüsen. These three differing kinds of memory are communicative, social, and cultural. Communicative memory involves, unsurprisingly, “open communication” as members of communities attempt to find common elements amongst

¹⁶ Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning*, 147.

¹⁷ Rüsen, 36, 148.

¹⁸ Ricoeur, *Memory History, Forgetting*, 317, 320.

differing experiences. These commonalities are usable in broadly defining complex periods and become the accounts from which social memory is formed. Social memories then tend to represent the “elements of present past that communities refer to in order to be seen as a community.” The Historians’ Controversy was precisely such an instance of memories being processed and communicated socially to determine what defined the social experiences. The same is occurring in *The Lives of Others* film as will be seen with regards to the East German memories and experiences with state surveillance during the Cold War. The transition from communicative to social memories is perpetuated by differing narratives and experiences coming into the limelight, either through personal accounts or within cultural products and an overarching narrative forming out of them. Cultural memory comes to be formed more slowly and after further integrations of selective incorporation and interpretations within varying social memories which become an underlying basis for a broader sense of identity. The experiences which become incorporated into a cultural memory are much more reserved as one of its major purposes is to offer a sense of stability and continuity and is, therefore, largely resistant to change.¹⁹ These memories typically form only if there is an impactful enough event which has come to define many differing social groups within the culture and after a period of time, with aspects of the Nazi legacy and its understanding as certainly having come to be present in the German cultural memory now.

Although social memory acts to synthesize common experiences, its role in informing the trajectory of social perspectives cannot be denied. By reflecting the “arts” side of the

¹⁹ Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning*, 174.

historiographical process, its “subjectivity” results in its recreations being “emotionally powerful and lively” or even “spontaneous, impulsive and untethered.” Such attributes make it a “greater motivator for action” as memories remains unbridled from any “dictate of accuracy” as with the inherent impartiality of history aimed to be preserved through the historiographical operation. This contrasts acutely with the “methodological procedures of historical knowledge” highlighting how the two are related but inherently different.²⁰ Memories provided the basis for the individuals who called-in to the historian’s hotline and raged about the inaccuracies depicted in the holocaust mini-series. Such opinions could very well be honest and truthful descriptions of the individual’s own experiences, and this represents the complexity of memory and experience. For experiences do differ, and memories can reflect such differences while they can also be untrustworthy or deceptive in its recollections are recreations of the past. This is why the historiographical process seeks to incorporate a diversity of memories and representations, and also why social memories are formed from the communication betwixt such memories. The former relies on verifiability, while the latter on shared or accepted common experiences. With such an understanding of the formation of social memories and how it differs from history, a brief analysis of the differing mediums in which memory comes to be communicated is warranted, so to explain the “how” and “why” of understanding and interpreting the past and present.

The question of fictional representations in shaping and/or depicting social memories and consciousness comes into focus with memory and history adequately distinguished. René

²⁰ Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning*, 171-72.

Girard once criticized scientific and literary critics for dismissing “literature” as “ultimately meaningless,” and lacking “any relation to reality,” seemingly “unsuited for critical scholarly analysis.”²¹ Girard’s argument was geared towards a defence of the value inherent within myths and traditions as vessels preserving social and cultural information but such an argument could, and should, be extended towards the role which popular culture and fictional narratives come to play in society today. Many narratives embedded within cultural products, such as films and literature, are informed by or linked with experiences and memories of the recent past. Such representations offer a glimpse into how a society is perceiving past experiences and, in other words, the general social consciousness outside the academic and historiographical institution. Although many of these narratives do, in fact, utilize the research and narratives put forth in scholarly works, such recreations are themselves not bound by the same standards and represent a different form of interpretation of the past. For example, the aforementioned prevalence of emotions and biases within these narratives act as tools of communication and narration rather than simply being taboos which need be avoided, and through such a personalization of historical events, the issues and themes from the past are made relatable and meaningful to those lacking firsthand experiences or encourage those with firsthand experiences to find similarities in their own stories.²²

Contextualizing the Stasi

Germany’s own cultural storytelling is unique due to the plethora of traumas within its past, both inflicted and experienced. Such memories are a mainstay within its fictional creations

²¹ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 206.

²² Ricoeur, *Memory History, Forgetting*, 333.

and act as a means of making sense of said past. This is why the hardships experienced by non-conformers within the German Democratic Republic's surveillance state are dramatized and well represented in recent cultural products following Germany's unification. In the aftermath of the GDR's existence, questions of surveillance and conformity have come to occupy a prevalent place amidst the minds and memories of a unified Germany as its population takes measure of the recently closed chapter of its two-state existence.

East Germany's experiences and memories have been recreated in multiple ways, but perhaps most notably in Donnersmarck's fictional work called *The Lives of Others*. Here, the nefarious Stasi organization's representation offers bountiful contrasts with the historical record and provides an excellent tool for investigating the relationship between memory, history, and fiction. By placing aspects of the film into a historical analysis, the variances reveal both what is being emphasized alongside that which is absent and how this shapes what aspects of the past are being repressed or emphasized in the narratives surrounding the East German experience. By juxtaposing such a fictional narrative with historical accounts, the questions and issues which surround said past in the public mind is presented. Conversely, such re-imaginings of past events into fresh narratives breathes new life into the events, perpetuating and facilitating a platform to discuss and contemplate the importance of the issues, in this instance privacy and the dangers associated with a state not beholden to its people but, rather, abusing its power and repressing deviancy. Fictions such as *The Lives of Others* offer an effective means for the non-historically inclined to address the historical legacy left behind by the GDR surveillance state and keep relevant these questions in circles that might otherwise abandon the past to history.

The Lives of Others epitomizes precisely how effective fictional tales can be at utilizing history and memory to produce social meaning. The film is set in 1984 and follows the character Gerd Wiesler who starts off as an ideal Stasi agent fully committed to protecting the state from any perceived threats. Gradually, however, he becomes disillusioned with the increasingly evident corruption and moral bankruptcy inherent within the all-intrusive surveillance state and begins down a path of self-agency and action. After being assigned to find incriminating evidence against an artist and playwright, Georg Dreyman, he begins relying on his own moral compass rather than conforming to the standard practices of his profession. This places him at odds with both his supervisor and the state's elites which climaxes with his own self-sacrifice, politically and socially, when he takes a stand against the injustice of the regime. Although fictional, many of the elements within this film can be traced to true events, making the film an exposé of how memory and fiction act in conjunction with history even while remaining separate from it.

From the outset, and so to ensure the viewer possesses a basic understanding of what the Ministry for State Security (the Stasi) was, Donnersmarck offers a cursory contextualization through the use of introductory credits:

1984, East Berlin. Glasnost is nowhere in sight. The population of the GDR is kept under strict control by the Stasi, the East German Secret Police. Its force of 100,000 employees and 200,000 informers safeguards the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Its declared goal: "To know everything".²³

The information presented here sets a clear picture and ominous tone for the film, while simultaneously offering a sense of factuality. The tone is expressed through the selective

²³ *The Lives of Others/Das Leben der Anderen*, directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, (Sony Pictures Classics, 2006), 0:00:10-0:00:25, YouTube.

phrasings like “the Dictatorship of the Proletariat” and “strict control” which brings to mind Rösen’s description of the *emotionality of memory*. Although there is nothing wholly inaccurate within these word choices, they do distinguish the film from a historiographical approach by seemingly reducing the entirety of the 1984 socialist experience in the GDR to one of suffering.

Taking a closer look at two of the terms used in these opening credits can reveal some differences in the approach the film takes opposed to the historiographical analysis.

“Dictatorship of the proletariat,” for example, may appear in the works of Lenin and Marx/Engels but is, in this instance, used in a derogatory and inaccurate way. Originally, such a phrase referenced the transitory period between the proletarian revolution and the institution of a communist system. By 1984, however, and with Erich Honecker’s rise to power, the German Democratic republic had officially entered what was described as “actually existing socialism.”²⁴ Such a description of the German Socialist State, therefore, would not have been used to describe the state in its own context except, as is the case here, in a derogatory sense. Describing the Stasi as utilizing “strict control” is another instance of setting the tone rather than communicating the complexity of the situation. Barbara Miller points out that it has now been established “the majority of [East Germans] had not, in fact ever been under direct surveillance” so such terminology within the credits do not actually present a whole truth and reality of the situation.²⁵ Yet, this film is not seeking to be a documentary account striving to stay as close to the historiographical narrative as possible. Rather, it is telling a story and portraying a fiction, attempting to capture the experiences and feelings that those who fell

²⁴ Fulbrook, *A History of Germany*, 245.

²⁵ Barbara Miller, *Narratives of Guilt and Compliance in Unified Germany: Stasi Informers and Their Impact on Society* (London: Routledge, 1999), 2-4.

victim to the Stasi apparatus would have felt. Such a narrative cannot capture the entire complexity of a society's entire experience, as this would require the interweaving of countless individual memories at the cost of losing emotionality and distancing the narration from the events. The tone set is in clear contrast to such an approach and prioritizes the evocation of darkness and the perceptions of the authoritarian state's victims, injecting emotionality as both signposts differentiating the fiction from historiography and as a means of making the depictions more relatable.

Prior to delving into depictions of the Stasi operations, a better understanding of what has influenced the memories and representations within Donnersmarck's film is necessary. Funder describes how the Stasi officially represented "'the shield and sword' of the Communist Party." This role of defending the Party and state regularly translated into the organization having to handle domestic threats in addition to foreign ones and caused individual rights to be regularly sacrificed in the name of building a better society.²⁶ Any deviation from the proclaimed set of national values and social norms could be met with social and political alienation and even imprisonment. As is shown in the movie and in first-hand accounts, merely associating with the wrong people or holding the wrong opinions could result in public ostracization and/or being taken in for *questioning* without any means for recourse.²⁷ Yet, the Stasi was itself an institution subject to change, evolving in its practices and approaches as time progressed.

²⁶ Anna Funder, *Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall* (Toronto: Harper Collins e-books, 2011), 59, Kindle.

²⁷ Funder, *Stasiland*, 54-66.

Having been founded in 1950, the Ministry for State Security would come to play a major role in the GDR experience. Although the institution did not seem to differ all that much from the KGB or the CIA, what set the Stasi apart was the “substantial amount of resources dedicated to internal affairs.”²⁸ It is hard to accurately capture just how expansive the Stasi influence was since the estimations on employment numbers are themselves a subject of debate. Even the figures given at the start of the film are *estimations* (and this is the key word absent in the film’s captions) as the amounts clearly differ depending on the time and the source. Author Anna Funder, for instance, estimates said employment of officers and informers at 97,000 and 173,000, John Koehler at 102,000 and 174,000, while Alison Lewis states 90,000 and 189,000. Barbara Miller, on the other hand, offers a summary of the full-time operatives from 1974 to 1989 at 55,718 and 91,000 respectively, not including the 174,000 estimated informers active in 1989.²⁹ By the late eighties, then, there was relatively close to a hundred thousand employees working for the Ministry of State Security as stated in the opening credits, but the informer numbers were much more subject to change especially over the Stasi’s operational history.

Notably, 1968 saw the GDR take a substantial shift in its role within German society. A new criminal code was introduced marking this transition when its initial mandate of being charged to “protect the socialist state and social order” would shift towards “prevention and rehabilitation over punishment.” Even though this resulted in a reduction of the more blatant

²⁸ Miller, *Narratives of Guilt and Compliance*, 3.

²⁹ Funder, *Stasiland*, 57-59, Kindle; John O. Koehler, *Stasi: The Untold Story of The East German Secret Police* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999) 8-9; Alison Lewis, *A State of Secrecy: Stasi Informers and the Culture of Surveillance* (Potomac Books, 2021), xiv, Kindle; Miller, 4.

forms of coercion undertaken by the Stasi, it was accompanied by a substantial increase in “covert surveillance,” allowing the institution to be more aware of “political crimes and social deviance.” This shifting emphasis on surveillance brought about a greater reliance on the “informal operatives” as the Stasi attempted to get records of “conversations on any and everything.” These informers came to reflect a broad range of society, including “neighbors, fellow workers and students, family members, [and even] friends at the neighborhood bar.”³⁰

This utilization of informers represented a key aspect of the Stasi experience which has been a source of outrage following the opening of the Stasi’s Files to the public. Still, however, the estimates given above do not fully convey the true extent of informer usage throughout the GDR experience. Instead of focusing on a singular year, Caldwell and Hanshew offer estimations over multiple years and place such numbers at as many as 600,000 Informal Operatives (IMs and/or informants) between 1950 and 1984.³¹ In ratio-form, then, such estimates range from anywhere between one informer for every 150 citizens in the sixties to up to “one for every 100 by the 1980s.”³² Even with such an expansive representation in the population, it must also be kept in mind that these informers were not “distributed evenly among the population but were recruited according to the [Stasi’s] Focusing Principle.” This principle was designed to fight “subversive enemy attacks” by “concentrating all operative forces and means... on the most important areas of operation, that is on those objects, areas, territories, groups and individuals where preventative security measures are required.” Known oppositional groups or church

³⁰ Caldwell and Hanshew, *Germany Since 1945: Politics, Culture, and Society*, 136-137.

³¹ Caldwell and Hanshew, 137.

³² Caldwell and Hanshew. See Lewis, *A State of Secrecy*, xiv. for a similar account; or for the most radical estimations deducing the possibility of one out of six citizens were informers when including “part-time snoops” see koehler, *Stasi: The Untold Story*, 8-9.

communities would often be subjected to greater scrutiny and higher ratios of informers, but, again, this does not necessarily extend evenly across the entire country.³³ Such variations in both numbers and interpretations highlight a major difference between the historiographical operation and what is presented through the lens of memory in this film. This film forgoes the uncertain nature of the historical record with regards to its emphasis on employment and, instead, presents a sense of certainty. Recall the intrinsic differences between the judge and the historian, with the judge needing to pass judgement in the moment while the historian is able to work within an ever-evolving narrative and an endless process of revision. Regardless of the shifting estimates, the opening statement and the story line that is to follow presents the viewer with a clear impression of just how expansive surveillance was and the damage it could reek in conjunction with repression.

[The Stasi: Terror Through Oppression and Surveillance](#)

Following such historical contextualization, the film can be seen as communicating two primary themes with regards to the Stasi and GDR experience. The first is focused on the barbarity and inhumanity of the institution. This includes the interrogation techniques used, the readiness with which the state was willing to define an individual as an enemy or to prosecute them, and the organization's use of blackmail and threats. The second is focused on the reach which the institution had and is presented in the methods which information was collected, the Stasi's utilization of informants, and the sheer amounts of information gathered. Together, these two themes preserve some of the major characteristics attributable to the GDR

³³ Miller, *Narratives of Guilt and Compliance*, 20.

experience and embedded within them are narrative recreations which correlate closely with real experiences.

Shifting attention to the film's opening scene, Wiesler is shown interrogating a citizen suspected of aiding his neighbor in fleeing to the West. The depiction of interrogation communicates both the oppressive nature of the State and a common method used to gain information. Here, the viewer is greeted with the grim fate which awaited many real individuals who were brought in for such questioning by the Stasi.³⁴ This scene depicts continuous sleep deprivation alongside interrogation, but what makes this treatment even worse, and at the same time even more accurate, is how the crimes warranting such harsh and inhumane treatment were as miniscule as aiding some ordinary person in fleeing the country (otherwise known as leaving) or being caught attempting to leave/flee oneself. The closing off of the borders is a whole complex issue in itself and will not be further analyzed here, but it represents a pivotal element in German social memories and perceptions regarding this era and highlight a glaring example of state infringement on individual rights.

Anna Funder conveys a personal account reflecting the filmic depiction of interrogation. In *Stasiland* she records a conversation with Miriam Weber who shares that she "became, officially, an Enemy of the State at sixteen. At six-teen."³⁵ This was back in 1968 and had resulted from her decision to protest the events having just taken place in the infamous Prague Springs. In punishment for putting up posters stating things like "'Consultation, not water cannon!' and 'People of the People's Republic speak up!'," she and her friend/accomplice were

³⁴ *The Lives of Others*, Donnersmarck, 0:05:45 – 0:05:55.

³⁵ Funder, *Stasiland*, 15.

subjected to interrogation and isolation for thirty days. This included “no visits from their parents or from lawyers, no books, no newspapers, not a phone call.” Following her release and while awaiting trial, she took a train towards East Berlin and attempted to flee to the West.³⁶ This escape attempt failed and resulted in a further ten days of interrogation made even more insufferable by being deprived of sleep. It would not end until Miriam confessed to who had helped her in her escape attempt, regardless of the fact that no one had. Her interrogators could not believe a minor would have had such a near successful attempt acting alone and refused to let up until she gave them names, so she resorted to creating a story to satiate them and be granted the right to sleep again. This kind of relentless interrogation pressure of being repeatedly asked the same questions in conjunction with sleep deprivation is captured quite well in the film.³⁷ Miriam recounts how her sentencing for such deviancy was a year and a half in prison and, following this, becoming socially blacklisted, unable to find work or even being able to study at university because the Stasi would always make sure she was “turned down.”³⁸

Another experience reflecting the Stasi’s willingness to use pressure and threats in order to achieve a desired end-result is presented in an account from a man who was himself apart of the Stasi apparatus. Hagen recalls submitting a letter of resignation to the Stasi after becoming aware that his father, after having met with his own biological father who was seen by the Stasi as a “Westkontakte,” lost his job. Hagen’s act of protest was followed immediately by his own arrest on trumped up charges regarding the “Preparation and Reproduction of Pornographic

³⁶ Funder, *Stasiland*, 16-18.

³⁷ For full details of Miriam’s escape attempt see, Funder, Chp 3; for interrogation, see Funder, 24; for the story she told the at her interrogation, see Funder, 27-30.

³⁸ Funder, 35.

Material.” Stasi officers went to his house to tear it apart while pressuring his wife with threats and intrusive questions regarding her and her husband’s love life. Although she insisted she knew nothing about the accusations, she was threatened with a five-year prison sentence and having her child taken away unless she divorce her husband.³⁹ Gaining her signature, the divorce papers were then used to *convince* Hagen to revoke his resignation and return to the Stasi organization with a renewed pledge of “lifelong service.”⁴⁰ This blackmail operation sought both to keep all of Hagen’s knowledge of Stasi operations and procedures safe within the organization while also driving a wedge between him and his wife, who was always seen as “inappropriate.” He was even told that without her “negative influence” in his life, he could “probably be promoted.”⁴¹ As can be seen in this account, the Stasi would stoop to nefarious lows in order to achieve compliance and collusion.

Although the inhumane strategies mentioned above were doubtlessly committed in numerous situations, the sheer scale with which the Stasi collected and recorded information is perhaps its most distinguishing aspect. Information collection was undertaken either through direct or indirect surveillance. In the first instance, the film does an excellent job of portraying the utter intrusiveness with which operations were executed. There are depictions of apartment break-ins, wire-tapping, and makeshift surveillance centres being set up from which Stasi operators, such as the Wiesler, would be stationed and able to carefully record everything that occurred in the apartment in question. Nothing was private. Yet, as seen in the estimated employment numbers, there was only a limited pool of official employees to undertake such a

³⁹ Funder, *Stasiland*, 173.

⁴⁰ Funder, 174.

⁴¹ Funder, 169, 175-76.

rigorous approach to observation. The opening lecture-hall scene reinforces how this repressive power was, in fact, maintained by a minority. Here, a measly sixteen students are sitting in attendance in an auditorium able to hold over a hundred people.⁴² Although seemingly reflective of Arts programs in universities today, it is meant here to emphasize how a relatively small number were able to make their presence felt across the country. The success of this minority was largely a result of the indirect surveillance methods which the Stasi utilized and revolves greatly around the compliance and contributions of citizens themselves, those who acted as informers.

Informers were perhaps the most upsetting aspect for Germans following revelations exposing the full extent of surveillance in the GDR. Doubtless this stemmed from feelings of betrayal and an understanding of just how compliant the population was in morally questionable areas. Yet, in the film, citizenry collusion is largely depicted through a lens of coercion. As will be seen, there is a major emphasis on portraying the Stasi organization itself and the social elites as being the progenitors of all things unwell. The two primary instances dealing with citizens providing information on their neighbors or simply remaining silent are depicted amidst a backdrop of coercion. Although such instances doubtlessly occurred, the fact that compliance was achieved without any such force is something which only begins to appear in later social reflections on this era and is reflective of how social memories are socially maintained and have an inherent use-value. In this instance, the use of such memories and depictions relegating blame is likely done as a means of avoiding internal social strife. Still, it

⁴² The Lives of Others, Donnersmarck, 0:04:20.

remains important to provide some greater explanations as to how informers were recruited both in the film and in real experiences, in addition as to why.

The depictions within the few of informers are of citizens who are forced into collusion with the state. The first example comes after Wiesler and his team break into Georg Dreyman's apartment in order to plant listening devices and wire taps. As they are leaving, his neighbor is caught observing the Stasi agents through her door's peep hole. She is forced out of her home and subsequently sworn to silence by means of explicit threats to her granddaughter's future and education.⁴³ In the following instance, Dreyman's own lover Christa-Maria is brought in for questioning as the Stasi are attempting to find the location of a contraband typewriter which was representative of all the incriminating evidence needed to have Dreyman locked away for a very long time. Christa eventually relents and gives up the location, but subsequently commits suicide out of guilt and shame.⁴⁴ At the end of the film when Dreyman is reading through his Stasi files, he finds a document where there is a record of Christa stating how she was "freely" committing herself "to work unofficially for the Ministry of State Security" even though the audience knew the information she gave was a result of intimidation and pressure.⁴⁵ These two examples focus on representing the coercive approaches utilized by the Stasi in achieving compliance, but the reality is that sometimes informers did not need such extreme levels of *encouragement*.

⁴³ *The Lives of Others*, Donnersmarck, 20:00-23:10.

⁴⁴ *The Lives of Others*, 1:44:00-1:48:20.

⁴⁵ *The Lives of Others*, 2:06:27.

Anna Funder recalls a more complicated historical interpretation from the perspective of an ex-Stasi agent. Talking with “Herr Bock of Golm” who taught “*Spezialdisziplin*” meaning the “science of recruiting informers,” she is told an inside perspective on the informer recruitment process.⁴⁶ After identifying an area where there was a perceived need to have internal information gathered, in an apartment block or supermarket, for example, Bock describes how potential informers would be themselves observed for a period of time prior to being approached. Often, the individuals asked would agree without issue, but this did not mean the Stasi never searched for “weak points” in the event they needed to have “leverage.” Herr Bock believes that the reason the Stasi was so successful in recruiting all sorts of individuals to inform on their fellow citizens often boiled down to two primary factors. Either from their own individual sense of duty and being “convinced of the cause,” or simply for personal reasons, such as the desire to be heard, feel empowered, or simply to avoid any issues themselves.⁴⁷ Although coercion was a means usable, often citizens were compliant without being subjected to any such methods. It should be noted, however, that being subject to observation was not just something affecting the population, but Stasi members themselves.

This film depicts internal surveillance within the Stasi apparatus along with the official justification rhetoric used to defend the questionable violations of individual rights. In the opening lecture-hall scene, after Wiesler has described the efficiency of sleep deprivation alongside interrogation as a means for breaking those withholding information, a student vocally questions why such “inhumane” strategies were being used.⁴⁸ In response to this

⁴⁶ Funder, *Stasiland*, 195.

⁴⁷ Funder, 198-201.

⁴⁸ *The Lives of Others*, Donnersmarck, 0:03:10.

observation, Wiesler marks an asterisk beside the student's name on a piece of paper, seemingly denoting him as unreliable and requiring a closer eye. By the end of the lecture, Wiesler proceeds to explain how such sentimentality should never be extended to those brought in for questioning or under surveillance because they were not comrades and fellow citizens but "enemies of socialism."⁴⁹ This kind of justification is echoed in Funder's interview with Herr Bock, who was himself "a professor at the training academy of the ministry."⁵⁰ When asked what kinds of individuals the Stasi surveillance methods were being utilized against, he responded bluntly: "enemies." When Funder delved deeper into what made a person an enemy he simply stated "'once an investigation was started into someone, that meant there was suspicion of enemy activity'" and that was enough reasoning to treat them as such.⁵¹ The film captures this kind of self-justifying logic well, along with what such an outlook would result in, that is, a perpetually larger need for surveillance and therefore, an ever increasing production of documentation.

Depicting the enormous amounts of documentation generated ensures the scale of Stasi intrusion is effectively captured. Following the re-unification of the two Germanies, the fictional Georg Dreyman goes to look at his own Stasi record and is presented with two giant piles of paperwork.⁵² Visually, the sheer scale of the warehouse which houses, in reality, all of such paperwork produced by the Stasi acts as a kind of *works cited* page for the film director. The true scale of the Stasi's collected works is described by Funder as "'equivalent [to] all records in

⁴⁹ *The Lives of Others*, 0:05:45.

⁵⁰ Funder, *Stasiland*, 195.

⁵¹ Funder, 199.

⁵² *The Lives of Others*, 2:04:00 – 2:07:00.

German history since the Middle Ages. Laid out upright and end to end, the files the Stasi kept... would form a line 180 kilometres long.”⁵³ Stasi records bridge the gap between this fiction and the social reality and from this legacy of spying on one’s own people, the Stasi past is elevated to a prominent place in the German consciousness in present day recollections.

The official decision to open the Stasi files to the public was a decision not taken lightly but has become a public reminder of a German’s need to stand up for the rights and freedoms they value. Yet, as Barbara Miller argues, the decision to make the Stasi Files public meant not only that victims could look back and better understand the course of their misfortunes, but, conversely, that “the inhabitants of the former GDR were confronted with harsh realities concerning the extent of their own compliance and conformity” which contributed to the effectiveness of Stasi intrusion.⁵⁴ These elements of compliance and conformity are not a mainstay in the narration of this film, and are actually largely avoided. This is where historical methodology and memory diverge once again. The mere fact that the state utilized its own citizens to garner information about their neighbors was enough evidence to collectively define the entirety of the GDR experience in a critical lens, characterized by an “an all-prevailing atmosphere of distrust.”⁵⁵ This type of memory has been carried over into Donnersmarck’s film but with the emphasis on saddling the Stasi organization and the state with the responsibility of creating such a social atmosphere. Less touched on here is the complications which are brought about when accounts of civilian willingness to inform or divulge information on their neighbors emerge. A particularly troubling thought considering this occurred in the aftermath of the

⁵³ Funder, *Stasiland*, 5.

⁵⁴ Miller, *Narratives of Guilt and Compliance*, 2.

⁵⁵ Miller.

complicity which acted to enable the Nazi government in committing acts of genocide. Such willingness to comply with or stand aside in the face of immoral actions is a theme which has come to haunt German reflections but one which is notably absent in this film.

Conclusion

Although this film does not claim to be a historical representation of the events and traumas which occurred at the hands of the Stasi, it does effectively recount much of the essence of Stasi victims' experiences in a fictional form. Veiled behind this, however, is the film's contributions to the broader public perceptions on such social recollections, and as already touched on, these contributions appear both in factors included and excluded. The primary focus of this film falls upon the corrupt nature of the GDR as a state and the Stasi as an organization. These two entities represent the true antagonists of the narrative and are represented further by the institutional and political elite, all of whom are shown as morally corrupt and degenerate. In contrast to this, the two protagonists are placed in a tale of oppression, suffering, and resistance. Both these two characters chose to act for the greater good even though it ended up costing them personally and reflects the social desire to have overcome the greatest issue of its past in its complicity towards the Nazi regime's actions.

The black and white interpretation embedded within the film's narrative is reminiscent of the initial processes used in remembering and processing the experiences under the Third Reich. In such an example, recall how the early German emphasis focused on the Nazi hierarchy and those easily identifiable figures while narratives of *ignorance, innocence, and resistance* were being perpetuated with regards to the broader public's role. Obviously, the issues and traumas in question within this film do not equate with the atrocities of the Nazi regime, yet

the processing of guilt and trauma reflects a similar vein. *The Lives of Others*' narrative mirrors such an approach by its emphasis on the *innocence* of the citizenry who are almost exclusively depicted as Stasi victims, held hostage by the Stasi's *strict control* and the corrupt state. In addition to this, small acts of *resistance* are seen within the actions taken by the protagonists Wiesler and Dreyman by their defiance to conform, and even in Christa's suicide after having been forced into collusion. Yet, the reality was much more complicated than these narratives paint the GDR and its history. This is not to deny such perceptions forthright, for as Barbara Miller acknowledges, many who lived within the GDR likely felt as if the Stasi was "physically omnipresent" and, thereby, subjected themselves to "a form of self-imposed censorship."⁵⁶ But to re-emphasize how such depictions and interpretations are reflections of memories and experiences of many, but do not follow the historiographical model and aim to give a full account, this presentation represents societal interpretations being perpetuated at the time of this film's release in 2006, but these perceptions have already begun to shift.

The references made in this film regarding the trauma's associated with the GDR state and its Ministry for State Security's surveillance apparatus have continued to appear regularly in Germany's cultural products and fictions. These interpretations and recreations will continue precisely because of the impact the experiences had on those who were affected by them. Even though society has distanced itself temporally from such occurrences and even though the organization and state responsible have been dissolved, the scares and traumas remain. As a consequence, the Stasi's legacy is preserved in the ever-changing social memories alongside the

⁵⁶ Miller, *Narratives of Guilt and Compliance*, 2-4.

fictional narratives they birth. There are notable other forms of cultural products and fictions which deserve analysis and comparison which highlight the continued evolution of the social perceptions surrounding such a legacy, but alas this is an analysis for another day.

Bibliography

- Bruce, Gary. *The Firm: The Inside Story of the Stasi*. Oxford, 2010.
- Caldwell, Peter C., and Karrin Hanshew. *Germany since 1945: Politics, Culture, and Society*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.
- Cornils, Ingo. *Beyond Tomorrow: German Science Fiction and Utopian Thought in the 20th and 21st Centuries*. New York: Camden House, 2020. Kindle.
- Donnersmarck, Florian Henckel von, dir. *The Lives of Others/Das leben der anderen*. 2006. YouTube.
- Fulbrook, Mary. *A History of Germany 1918-2014: The Divided Nation*, 4th ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.
- Funder, Anna. *Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall*. Toronto: Harper Collins Ebooks, 2011. Kindle.
- Garton Ash, Timothy. *The File: A Personal History*. New York: Random House, 2009.
- GDR-Guide: Everyday Life in a Long Gone State in 22 Chapters*. Edited by Robert Rückel. Berlin: DDR-Museum-Verlag E.K., 2008.
- Gieseke, Jens. *The History of the Stasi: East Germany's Secret Police. 1945-1990*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2014. PDF.
- Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Koehler, John O. *Stasi: The Untold Story of the East German Secret Police*. Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1999.
- Lewis, Allison. *A State of Secrecy: Stasi Informers and the Culture of Surveillance*. Lincoln: Potomac books, 2021. Kindle.
- Menner, Simon. *Top-Secret: Bilder Aus Den Archiven Der Staatssicherheit*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013.
- Miller, Barbara. *Narratives of Guilt and Compliance in Unified Germany: Stasi Informers and Their Impact on Society*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Ritter, Cody. "The Communist Manifesto: A Weapon of Mass Destruction or A Tool for Tomorrow?" *Constellations* 13, no. 1 & 2 (n.d.). DOI: 10.29173/CONS29490.
- Rüsen, Jörn. *Evidence and Meaning: A Theory of Historical Studies*. Translated by Diane Kerns and Katie Digan. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017.

- Rüsen, Jörn. „Humanism in Response to the Holocaust-Destruction or Innovation?“ *Postcolonial Studies* Vol. 11, no. 2 (2008): 191-200. DOI: 10.1080/13688790802004703.
- Rüsen, Jörn. “Looking Back – a Pensive Balance” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* vol. 22, no. 4 (2018):490-499. DOI: 10.1080/13642529.2018.1506545.
- Rüsen, Jörn. “Tradition: A Principle of Historical Sense-Generation and Its Logic and Effect in Historical Culture” *History and Theory* 51, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): 45-559. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2303.2012.00646.x.
- Schaer, Cathrin. "Germany's surveillance fears: thirty years after the fall of the Berlin wall and the disbanding of East Germany's secret police, the Stasi, Germans are worried about who is watching them" in *inexpensive on censorship*, Sept 2019 48(3), PDF.