10 A legacy of the DDR

The Stasi Records Archive

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Introduction

“The open records are a gift of the revolution”.¹ This headline is a fitting shorthand for what is at the core of the Stasi Records Archive’s power. It describes its historic origin as well as the responsibility deriving from it while identifying the yet untested idea at the core: never before had the opening of *all* records of a state intelligence body in order to address the wrongs of the past been attempted. It took the people of East Germany and their uprising against one-party rule in 1989 to make this possible. As a result, the united Germany for 30 years has used these records in numerous ways to address issues of transitional justice, history, remembrance, and also contemporary conflicts, rendering the records an established part of the *memory of the nation*.

In this case study, the archive’s story will be told through the three historic phases that determined its course. First, the records will be put in the context of their origin in order to understand the specific nature of the information they contain and their potential. Second, the circumstances will be described which transferred control over these records to the people and what they hoped to achieve in a process that ended with the institution of a Commissioner as custodian on the day of German unification. And third, this chapter will address the way access to the Stasi records was organized and what effect it had in addressing the injustices committed under the SED dictatorship. It will end with a perspective on the future of the records.

A people under suspicion: records of repression

In order to better understand the content of the archive and its potential, it is helpful to briefly retrace the history that led to its creation. As Eastern Europe after World War II quickly became a consolidated bloc of communist states under Soviet control, the prospect of democracy and universal access to human rights, a then nascent idea, disappeared from the political agenda. One-party rule was established throughout Eastern Europe, leaving no room for civic society and fulfillment of rights. The historian Anne

Applebaum analyses in her three-country study “Iron Curtain” in great detail how quickly the Soviet Union was able to turn the post-war societies of Central Europe into one-party-ruled communist states within its sphere of influence. “The speed with which this transformation took place was, in retrospect, nothing short of astonishing. In the Soviet Union itself the erection of a totalitarian state had taken two decades, and it had proceeded in fits and starts”.²

East Germany was founded as a state on October 7, 1949. By then the Soviet-backed Socialist Unity Party (SED) of East Germany was already in control of power by manipulating the election process in East Germany. To consolidate its reign, the SED sought to establish control over all sectors of society and continuously protect it.³ One of the central tools of the communist party’s maintenance of power was the use of secret police organizations. In East Germany, the Ministry for State Security (MfS) was founded in February 1950, under strict supervision by thousands of Soviet operatives on the ground.⁴ From its inception, it considered itself the “shield and sword” of the communist party. The mindset of the officers of the MfS was steeped in the ideology of service to the SED and the protection of the “communist revolution” from all “enemies” under all circumstances. This mentality determines the logic of the work of the MfS, and the records reflect this logic and psychology.

For 40 years, the Ministry for State Security, widely known by its German acronym Stasi, set out to protect the party’s hold on power by treating its own people as the central most dangerous source of instability. As long as people were adhering to the demands of the communist party and fulfilled their socialist duties as laid out from kindergarten to workplace, no trouble followed. But expressions of dissent – from adhering to a religious faith to refusing military education at school, from listening to Western music to reading books critical of the regime – would almost always land you in the sights of the Stasi.

The Stasi’s core mission was to gather information as precautionary strategy. Once “political-ideological diversion”⁵ was detected, the Stasi became active against those citizens in order to prevent any activity from growing into a problem for the party’s hold on power. When in June 1953 an uprising against the party mobilized over one million people all over East Germany, an existential crisis of the young SED state had come about. Worse, it had caught the emerging Ministry for State Security off-guard. Only with the help of Soviet tanks was the SED able to squash the “Volksaufstand”, the people’s uprising. The SED saw the uprising as a failure of control and blamed the Stasi.⁶ The secret police was from then on under pressure to prove that it was able to foresee any such movement – an enormous task. Forms of dissent could be manifold throughout society and untold numbers of people could be defined as “enemies” of the party. It became the Stasi’s prime objective to have eyes and ears everywhere in society or at least to maintain the aura of such omnipotence. One of its central tools in

this endeavor was the use of regular citizens as informants. In 1989, about 180,000 of these “unofficial collaborators”, as they were called in the Stasi bureaucracy, were registered in the files as active. The ministry itself had 91,000 official employees. In relation to the East German population of 16 million inhabitants, the Stasi was the largest secret police apparatus in Eastern Europe during the Cold War.

A people’s uprising: the records and the revolution

In East Germany, after the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, the citizens soon found an urgent call to action. The Stasi had begun to destroy documents which prompted East Germans, beginning on December 4, 1989, to occupy the buildings of the Stasi all over the East in order to stop the destruction of the files.⁷ Those activists saw these documents as evidence of human rights violations, needed for future discourse over this period. When on January 15, 1990, citizens also invaded the premises of the Stasi headquarters in Berlin, the power of the dreaded secret police had finally been broken.⁸ Their records however were preserved and in the hands of the people. They now had to decide what to do with a body of documentation that had been under the administration for 40 years of one ministry which had carefully preserved the whole archive.

Citizens’ committees formed to determine how to handle the records. “To each their own file” had been an often-heard demand during the demonstrations. After 40 years of being spied upon and living under the rule of the party, people wanted access to the files. As the first Commissioner for the Stasi Records Joachim Gauck observed, they demanded to regain control over the information to “free themselves”.⁹ Despite an intense debate about the pros and cons of opening these records in the crumbling East Germany, the demand by the people who had just toppled a regime in a peaceful revolution – to open the Stasi records – became impossible to deny in the ensuing process of German unification. Even additional skeptical voices from the West could not stop the momentum.¹⁰ The saved records were made accessible for the people and the archive opened on the day of German unification.

The process that led to the idea of opening the archive was a natural outcome of the developments in the Peaceful Revolution and a logical consequence of the engagement of the newly empowered citizenry. The tables had turned, the power over the information now belonged to the people, and they wanted access, a demand they carried over into the unification process.¹¹ They had not necessarily conceived of access to the Stasi records as an essential part of the transition, as unification had not been foremost on their minds. But as the vast majority of transitional justice processes rely on archives,¹² the “open records” also became a central ingredient of the German transition process.

There were two additional uniquely German factors that contributed to the decision-making process to open the archive immediately after the regime change. First, the previous reckoning with another dictatorship, the Nazi regime, was a decisive factor, especially on the West German side which held more political power over the unification process. Coming to terms with the holocaust and the war crimes of World War II as the perpetrator nation had been a slowly evolving process that over time developed into a sustained and concrete effort.¹³

National Socialist crimes and their victims are an integral part of collective memory and Germany's political identity. That German society was able to shift from suppression and silence to an active engagement with crimes and guilt is often considered a central factor in its democratization.¹⁴

It was exactly this decades-long struggle with the murderous and monstrous past that set the stage for addressing the "other" German dictatorship of the 20th century right away. Addressing the Nazi past had strengthened democracy, but it had taken a long time. As a consequence, in 1990 the Germans in the process of unification were willing to embrace instant measures of actively addressing the communist repressive regime. Coupled with the ideas and standing of the East German dissidents and citizens who actively had freed themselves from that regime, opening the records right away became an accepted idea.

A second historic factor unique to the German case made the decision of an instant opening much easier to implement. The political elites who had benefited from the Stasi, no longer had any access to power. The disappearance of the state responsible for the injustices into a united Germany was also a central factor enabling the opening of the archive soon after the repressive regime ended. With the former East German state nonexistent, the need to use the documentation of the Stasi for an intelligence body in a new era was also eliminated, in fact it was as good as forbidden.¹⁵ The archive was opened on Day One of the reunited Germany on October 3, 1990, while other Eastern European countries started this process as much as 15 years later.¹⁶

A people coming to terms: the records and the reappraisal of the past

It took the united parliament, the "Deutsche Bundestag" just over a year to formulate the Stasi Records Act (StUG). With its enactment on December 29, 1991, the "Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic", in short Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records or BStU, began its work. The Commissioner was voted into office directly by the Bundestag for a term of five years that could be extended for another five years.¹⁷ This particular arrangement – a

person chosen by the Bundestag to head the archive on the basis of their biography and critical distance from the East German dictatorship – felt necessary at the time. It was meant to ensure an impartial, trustworthy, and rule-based access to the records, whose usability for political purposes had been proven in the last months of East Germany.¹⁸ Giving the job to a highly trustworthy individual mandated with a direct vote of confidence by parliament was meant to remedy any potential for abuse. The commissioner is independent in his exercise of office and bound by the rules set forth in the Stasi Records Act.¹⁹

The StUG has at its core the difficult task of balancing two opposing legal concepts. It requires transparency of government action while maintaining the privacy of those subjected to this action. The Act intends to “facilitate individual access to personal data pertaining to oneself which the State Security Service has stored so that the individual can clarify what influence the State Security Service has had on his personal destiny”.²⁰ While it enables access for individuals to their own data, the BStU is tasked to protect this data from public access. In a partial reversal of the data protection idea and to support transparency, the StUG makes records available for researchers and journalists for the purpose of enriching the public’s understanding of the power mechanisms of the SED dictatorship. Government action (by both the Stasi and the Communist Party) is meant to be rendered transparent and thus deprived of its secrecy. The StUG permits the leaving open of names of those working officially or unofficially for the Stasi when the documents are given to researchers or journalists, who in turn through their publications make those names widely known. This transparency is intended to foster public debate about the reappraisal of the past and the mechanisms of repression. In files given to researchers and journalists, information relating to subjects of Stasi activity²¹ is redacted, unless the persons concerned have given permission. Access to the names of those acting on behalf of the state is believed essential for a concrete discussion of injustices and for a chance to come to terms with each concrete action within the dictatorial system of East Germany.²²

Access to the records is, furthermore – defined as a third purpose in the Stasi Records Act – also allowed for both public and non-public institutions. In this process, names will be made known in a semi-public sphere. Agencies asking for information will be directly provided with information by the BStU on persons who are documented in the Stasi files. Publication of that information is in the hands of the asking party. Here the StUG allows for several sub-purposes. One is the vetting of people in public office or public administration to expose past activity as “unofficial collaborators”. Many public agencies request access also to further rehabilitation or reparations proceedings for victims of the Stasi, to clarify retirement issues or to support criminal investigations of SED and Stasi crimes.²³

Lastly, the agency of the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records itself is tasked with contributing to the reappraisal of the SED dictatorship. Its job

is the “analysis of the activity of the State Security Service through instruction of the public on structure, methods and mode of operation of the State Security Service”.²⁴ For this purpose, the Federal Commissioner established a research and education department in 1992. Numerous scientific and general audience publications, exhibitions, school materials, and increasingly, digital and online activities have been produced to bring the archive to life and to further discussions about the effects of the Stasi.

By the beginning of 2020, the agency has counted a total of 7.3 million requests for access, among them over 3 million requests by individuals, about 1 million of them as repeated requests for more information. With about 111 kilometers of documents, over 2 million uncontextualized photographs and manifold photos within the files, 30,000 audio files, films, and videos, and around 100 data projects, the Stasi Records Archive²⁵ is one of the largest archives in Germany. The BStU has a central location in Berlin and 12 outlying archives in Eastern cities where the Stasi used to have district administration offices.

The perception of the large set of measures that were implemented to address the injustices of the communist past was skewed through a complicated East–West lens. The narrative of how to deal with the East German past was partly overshadowed by the West German way of dealing with the Nazi past, while at the same time Western Germans also relished ideas of having been victorious over the Soviet empire:

No other state so directly addressed Cold War narratives of victory while simultaneously working through a totalitarian past. Following unification, the workings of the GDR regime were interrogated through legal trials of leaders and border police, and federal investigative commissions, a process based in part on Germany’s experience dealing with the National Socialist past (Deutscher Bundestag, 1994).²⁶

In this complicated landscape of two consecutive but very different German dictatorships and the disappearance of one German state through unification lies the unique character of the German case. As many historians have noticed about the ongoing process of unification, “narratives of the Cold War also continue to differ between Western triumphalism and Eastern defensiveness”.²⁷ The Stasi records permeated the many transitional justice processes as they were an ample, alluring, and – by the nature of the all-encompassing information they contained – indispensable resource. As a consequence, the Stasi in the 1990s dominated the dialogue of reappraisal of the East German dictatorship, with unintended consequences.

In the same measure as the reappraisal of the past in the united Germany seemed to be condensed to “Stasi” and “rule of injustice”, the objections of former East Germans to these terms rose. Their life in East

Germany appeared to have been kidnapped by a memory discourse dominated by “Stasi” and “Stasi state”.²⁸

The analysis of these issues is a rich field of future study which only now, as the events become historicized, is being examined more closely while the dialogue about the past continues.²⁹

The future of the Stasi Records Archive

The 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification in 2019 demonstrated the continued interest in using the Stasi records.³⁰ They have become a fixture within the national discourse over the German past. At the outset, the concept of having a stand-alone archival institution headed by a commissioner was not following a long-term plan but was driven by historical circumstances.³¹ The overwhelming need to deliver on the promise of access to the Stasi records on a lawful basis had to be addressed in the 1990s. The assumption was that within a decade, people’s need for access would diminish, and integrating the archive into the national archival structure would easily be accomplished. But the demand for access to the records proved to be a longer-lasting need strongly continuing throughout the 2000s, both strengthening the status of the BStU as an institution and rendering its institutional change a more delicate policy choice.

In 2008, the Bundestag decided to begin the process of integrating the Stasi Records Archive into the Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv).³² The timetable however was left open as there was little desire to appear willing to diminish the process of dealing with the past by rushing this institutional change.³³ A decade later, in the spring of 2019, the BStU and the Bundesarchiv handed a paper on the future of the Stasi records³⁴ to the Bundestag, who had in 2016 mandated that both institutions should jointly prepare a plan for the transfer of the Stasi Records into the Federal Archives to secure their permanent preservation.³⁵ In this concept paper, they propose that the “Stasi Records Archive” will be a new separate division within the Bundesarchiv with a special leadership. This “Stasi Records Archive” will continue the core of the BStU’s work with special provisions to maintain its special character and symbolic significance to the nation’s memory, to the victims as well as to the international community. Most importantly, the legal foundation for access to the records, the Stasi Records Act, will remain largely unchanged.³⁶ In November 2020, the Bundestag approved the plan³⁷ and legally finalized the integration of the Stasi Records Archive into the Bundesarchiv at the end of the term of the Federal Commissioner mid-2021.

After almost three decades in existence, the Stasi Records Archive has established its own place in German public discourse about the East German past. It has exhibited the “power of archives” in its own unique way.³⁸ It was instrumental in providing documentation to millions of individuals to clarify their fate in the dictatorship. It supported transitional justice

mechanisms from trials and vetting to rehabilitation to memorialization. As the prosecution of Stasi and SED members was not immensely successful,³⁹ as the basis for reparations was slow in coming and tedious in pay-out,⁴⁰ and as the majority's desire to reckon with the past or even discuss the past subsided in the harder realities of the unification process, the agency of the BStU was a continuing voice reminding society of this past. In this sense, the Stasi Records Archive through its unique history began to fulfill the kind of "symbolic reparation"⁴¹ that monuments usually can provide. Furthermore, many victims see an advocate on the national stage in the person of the Federal Commissioner. It is because of this reality that the Bundestag has also incorporated with its November 2020 decision the legal basis for a new commissioner for the victims of the SED dictatorship beginning his or her tenure when the records are transferred to the Bundesarchiv.⁴²

The current Federal Commissioner Roland Jahn often describes the archive and the records as a monument in and of itself, a "monument of surveillance". He renamed the former Ministry headquarters which are the home of the archive in Berlin, "Stasi Headquarters. Campus for Democracy".⁴³ This is part of a mission to turn the records and the archive at the historic site into an active arena for current discussions about the dangers of repressing human rights and the values of democracy. In this sense, the Stasi Records Archive already plays an active role in the conceptual view that "archivists must continue to be builders of the memory infrastructure".⁴⁴ With its 30-year interactive societal dialogue about the communist past, the archive has become a tool for the long-term work of "social reconstruction" and the "guarantee of non-repetition"⁴⁵ – a legacy from its unique historical origin as an archive from a revolution, which people fought for access to address the injustices of the past. It also provides what all archives do, a long-term resource for every new generation to ask their questions about the past, contributing to the development of public memory, seen as "an activity or process rather than an object or outcome".⁴⁶ The Stasi Records Archive is uniquely fitted to provide a model as an archival institution that uses the records of a repressive past to promote a continuous and active dialogue about human rights.

Notes

- 1 See: Jahn (2016).
- 2 See: Applebaum (2012), XXII.
- 3 Compare Maier (1997), Ch. 1, Losing Faith.
- 4 See: Gieseke (2014) and Münkler (2016).
- 5 A Stasi term for critical expression of thought, see: Engelmann et al. (2012).
- 6 See: Engelmann, Roger and Kowalczyk, Ilko-Sascha, hrsg. (2005).
- 7 See: Veen and Wurschi (2014).
- 8 See: Süß (1999).
- 9 See: Gauck (1991, p. 99).
- 10 See: Booß (2017).
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 As an example, see: United Nations (2015, p. 1).

- 13 I am describing only the development in West Germany as the communist East had its own but different way of addressing the Nazi past. See Henry Leide's "Nazi-Criminals and State Security: East Germany's Secret Policy of the Past" (Leide, 2005) or Annette Weinke's overview (Weinke, 2018).
- 14 See: Romeike (2016, p. 41).
- 15 The citizens' committees were adamant about denying or at minimum severely restricting access to the Stasi's information by Western intelligence services, which is reflected in the respective articles in the Stasi Records Act.
- 16 The European Network of Official Authorities in Charge of the Secret Police Files is the umbrella organization of these archives. Available at www.bstu.de/en/international/european-network/, accessed 15 March 2019.
- 17 Stasi Records Act (StUG). Article 35. *Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic*. Available at www.gesetze-im-internet.de/stug/, accessed 3 March 2019.
- 18 See: Booß (2017), Kobylinski (2015), and Lahmann (1992).
- 19 Pietrkiewicz/Burth, in: Geiger, Klinghardt, and Burth (2006), § 35, Rn. 13; all three commissioners were voted into office with a large majority. Available at www.bstu.de/en/the-agency/tasks-of-the-bstu/, accessed 3 March 2019.
- 20 Stasi Records Act (StUG). Article 1. *Purpose and Scope*. Available at www.bstu.de/en/the-agency/legal-basis/, accessed 3 March 2019.
- 21 The Stasi Records Act purposefully avoids the terms "victims" and "perpetrators" and speaks of "persons concerned" and "employees" of the Stasi.
- 22 The outing of informants became a widespread practice, not quite fulfilling the hopes of instigating the dialogue about concrete responsibility. This is a topic deserving of a broader discussion. See: Espindola (2015), Gieseke (2009a), and Hovestädt (2018).
- 23 The criminal prosecution of SED and Stasi crimes were largely an issue of the 1990s and statutes of limitations have passed for almost all crimes. See: Marxen, Werle, and Schäfer (2007) or Schißau (2006).
- 24 Stasi Records Act (StUG). Article 37. *Duties and Authority of the Federal Commissioner*. Available at www.bstu.de/en/the-agency/legal-basis/, accessed 3 March 2019.
- 25 Website BStU. Available at www.bstu.de/ueber-uns/bstu-in-zahlen/, accessed 3 March 2019.
- 26 See: Forest, Johnson, and Till (2004, p. 363); "Deutscher Bundestag" refers here to the report of the first committee established by the German parliament on the "Reappraisal of the history and consequences of the SED-Dictatorship in Germany" (translation by author), an additional TJ measure short of a truth commission. Available at <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/doc/btd/12/078/1207820.pdf>, accessed 7 March 2019.
- 27 See: Jarausch, Ostermann, and Etges (2017, p. 2).
- 28 See: Kittel (2017, p. 100; translation by author).
- 29 See, for example: Großbölting and Lorke (2017), Jarausch (2014), and Stan and Nedelsky (2015).
- 30 Bundestag resolution June 9, 2016, "Unwaveringly continuing reappraisal of the SED dictatorship" (Print Material 18/8705). The resolution affirmed the political commitment to permanently preserve the entirety of all Stasi records and maintain the visibility of the Stasi Records Archive as an international model for addressing injustices of the past as well as a symbol of the Peaceful Revolution of 1989.
- 31 See: Strothmann (1995), Huskamp Peterson (2005, p. 32), and Booß (2017). Also, the idea of treating the records as a "regular" national archival collection and integrating them right away into the national archives, was untenable in 1990. The fear that they would be subjected to the usual archival rules including a 30 year "cooling-off" period was seen as subverting the revolutionizers idea of access. Some distrust can still be felt 30 years later in public discussions around the integration into the Bundesarchiv in 2021.

- 32 Gedenkstättenkonzept des Bundes von 2008, 6. Available at www.bstu.de/assets/bstu/de/Downloads/bstu-in-zukunft_bundestag_fortschreibung-gedenkstaetten-konzept-bund.pdf, accessed 8 March 2019.
- 33 Throughout that period, there were many discussions on all sides of the political spectrum, with proponents of a quicker end to the special institution status as well as proponents of no end to the specialty status at all. With a backdrop of a risk of appearing too eager to end the reappraisal of this past, it is obvious why the process became so lengthy. These debates deserve an exploration of their own; for some pointers, see: Beleites (2004), Engelmann, *Die herbeigeschriebene "Legitimationskrise" Anatomie einer Kampagne gegen die Stasi-Unterlagen-Behörde* (2007).
- 34 Concept paper. Available at www.bstu.de/assets/bstu/en/Downloads/Agency_Future-of-the-Stasi-records_en.pdf, accessed 6 April 2019.
- 35 The concept paper makes ample note of the need for preservation and digitization of the records and the need to construct professional archival buildings. Under the auspices of the Bundesarchiv, those necessary investments are meant to be secured for the long-term future.
- 36 While this case study focuses on the future of the records, it is worth noting that the continuation of the position of a Federal Commissioner as an ombudsperson for the victims situated at the Bundestag was an important feature for the acceptance of the transition of the records into the federal archives. See the reaction of the largest victims' organization: <https://www.uokg.de/2020/11/stasi-unterlagen-gesetz-sed-opferbeauftragter-grosse-erwartungen-in-die-arbeit-der-order-des-opferbeauftragten/> accessed 19 December 2020.
- 37 Parliamentary protocol of the session of Deutscher Bundestag on November 19., 2020 and enactment documents on the transfer of the Stasi Records Archive into the Bundesarchiv: <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2020/kw47-de-bundesarchivgesetz-stasi-unterlagen-804234>, accessed 19 December 2020.
- 38 See: Hovestädt (2018), Gieseke (2009), and McAdams (2001); the "Power of Archives" is meant as an allusion to Randall Jimerson's work of the same name (Jimerson, 2009).
- 39 See: Marxen, Werle, and Schäfter (2007).
- 40 See: Vollnhals (2016).
- 41 See: Barsalou and Baxter (2007, p. 2).
- 42 See note 36.
- 43 Available at www.bstu.de/ueber-uns/stasi-zentrale-campus-fuer-demokratie/, accessed 15 March 2019.
- 44 See: Stinnett (2009, p. 17).
- 45 See: Barsalou and Baxter (2007, p. 10).
- 46 See: Forest, Johnson, and Till (2004, p. 358).

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