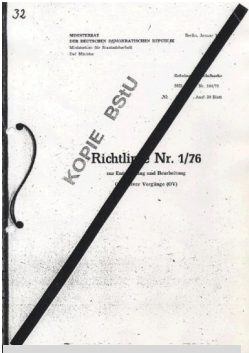


Literary encounters

This study is about the literary sphere in the GDR and the moments of contact between writers and the Stasi. It is based on the analysis of published sources alongside archive material from the Stasi Records Archive (BStU) and the Archive of Suppressed Literature in the GDR. Interviews were conducted with former GDR writers.



Cover of the MfS Guidelines Nr. 1/76 for the Development and Conduct of Operative Measures (i.e., the observation of individuals and groups) MfS, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

When the Stasi come knocking...

Bernd Wagner is a writer who lived in the GDR and was critical of the state and party. He was invited to give a reading in West Berlin and applied for permission to travel. A few days later a man in a grey suit appeared at his door and introduced himself as a representative of the Ministry for State Security (MfS, or Stasi), Lieutenant Weigel. Weigel said that Wagner was the target of West German secret services, who were planning to use him as part of a 'provocation'. Wagner was asked to provide information about his personal contacts to help the MfS protect him. Wagner refused and told Weigel exactly what he thought about such questions and life in the East German state. It was only after discussing the experience with his friends that Wagner realised that the conversation with the Stasi officer was an attempt to recruit him as an informant. When Weigel reappeared two days later, Wagner refused all further contact.

Knowing and not knowing

Uwe Kolbe is a writer who lived in the GDR and was critical of the state and party. His father worked as an officer in the Ministry for State Security (MfS, or Stasi). Kolbe began to suspect that his father was a Stasi officer at the age of 13 or 14. He did not know for sure until reading the Stasi files in 1992, but there had been clues that made him suspicious. When he was completing his military service, Kolbe suspected that there was an informant in his army unit, without knowing for certain. The individual had been brought into the unit after it had been formed, he did things that the other soldiers did not, and asked 'stupid questions'. Kolbe recalls that the informant 'deconspired' in their last outing together; that is, he told Kolbe that he was an informant. In retrospect, Kolbe says that the Stasi created an atmosphere of distrust, but that he was not actually very good at identifying informants and that his guesses were almost always wrong.

Rumours and trust

Ekkehard Maaß hosted meetings of writers and artists in his home in East Berlin. He recalls that everyone knew that there must be Stasi informants among the guests.

Because nobody could know for certain who was an informant, the organisers had to accept and simply ignore the presence of the Stasi. Ekkehard Maaß remembers that he pushed back against the circulation of rumours. One time, someone came to him and said: ‘Hey, Ekke, he’s in the Stasi, let’s not invite him anymore’ and Maaß would respond, ‘how do you know that? Did he tell you? Quit it with those kinds of suspicions!’. Spreading rumours was one of the methods that the Stasi used to break up oppositional groups.



Berlin, Houses in der Schönfließer Straße where Maaß’s salon was located.

Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-R0511-001 / Kohls, Ulrich / CC-BY-SA 3.0, CC BY-SA 3.0 DE

Open observation and confrontation



Bettina Wegner (1974) Saltzman, Public domain, via Wikimedia

Bettina Wegner is a singer-songwriter and poet who lived in the GDR. From 1972 to 1980, she was married to the writer Klaus Schlesinger. As prominent figures, who were critical of the state and party, Wegner and Schlesinger were subject to ‘open surveillance’ by the Stasi, a common tactic employed to engender fear. Wegner recalls cars pulling up outside their house and then being followed in a manner that was so obvious they were clearly meant to notice it. Wegner and Schlesinger often responded to the Stasi’s surveillance with their own strategies of direct confrontation. After the Stasi searched their apartment without a valid warrant and seized some of Wegner’s books and song lyrics, Schlesinger resolved to take legal action. On another occasion, when two Stasi officers attended one of Wegner’s performances at a youth club, she had two glasses of sparkling wine sent to the table where the Stasi officers were sitting, at which point the two men left the venue.

Conspicuous and inconspicuous strategies

Gabriele Stötzer is a writer and visual artist who lived in the GDR and was imprisoned for a year in 1977 for collecting signatures in protest against the expulsion of the singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann from the GDR in 1976. After her release, she moved in underground artistic circles and women’s groups and employed various strategies to deal with ongoing state surveillance. She made contact with the prominent writer Christa Wolf and spoke openly about this connection to make the Stasi scared about bad publicity. When she and her acquaintances organised underground exhibitions or readings, they talked openly about them so that word got around and the Stasi had to think twice about intervening and making their surveillance apparent. Other strategies were more covert. Stötzer remembers that everyone in the underground scene knew they had ‘one foot in prison’. She recalls helping a friend pay her electricity bill so that she wouldn’t attract the authorities’ attention for so-called ‘asocial’ behaviour. According to the Stasi files, she also organised her own covert observation of an underground art studio in Erfurt to make sure that it was secure as a meeting point.

In the church

This study concerns the German Protestant Church in the former GDR with a focus on the former Church Province of Saxony. We conducted interviews with pastors as well as administrative postholders such as bishops. In addition, there was archival research at the Stasi Records Archive (BStU). We requested personal files of the interviewees and files regarding particular events, institutions and timeframes.



Pews, Creative Commons.

Silence and telling someone

Several interviewees told us that when they were students, they were advised to notify their superiors if they had been approached by the MfS. Some were told by their lecturers, others heard about it from older students. At the Seminary in Naumburg, which was a training centre that was run by the church itself, new students even had to sign an agreement that they would not share information with the MfS and that they would notify their lecturer if they were approached by the MfS to become an informant. The MfS demanded secrecy from people they'd approached for collaboration. Breaking this silence and telling someone else however often meant that the MfS lost interest.

Tapping telephones

Ordinary people did not have phones in the GDR. But pastors usually had a phone in their home or their office due to their profession. Many interviewees spoke of the 'famous clicking' in the line, when – so people assumed – the MfS started to listen in. As a student pastor in the 1970s, Herr Mittig found that many of his visitors would only begin speaking once they had placed a cushion over the telephone. Mittig himself however did not believe that telephones were used to bug people's homes. At work meetings of church employees, the phone was never covered either. Reflecting on this in the interview, Mittig feels that the MfS never had the technical resources to run surveillance through all telephones across the GDR: *'that was nonsense.'*

Opening parcels and post?



Letter; courtesy Dr Anselma Gallinat

In the 1960s Pastor Waschkowski was in his first post and was getting the family home ready. His young wife lived temporarily with relatives. To help make ends meet friends and family sent parcels. Those friends included family Jonas, who lived in the FRG. In a letter from December 1968 he tells his wife of his observations regarding a number of parcels. The parcel from the Jonas's was the only one that had come from West Germany: *'By the way the Jonas's parcel is the only one that appears to have been checked and seemingly looted. At the very top two red straps, which serve no purpose, covered a book-sized gap. There was no book in the parcel.'* Seamlessly he continues: *'We'll talk about the wishes for H when I bring the bed. (By the way I haven't yet measured the bed to see if it'll fit into the Trabant.) ...'**

*A Trabant was a common, but small, East German car.

Surveillance

Starting his post as pastor at a state university, Herr Mittig found an interesting note on the notice board of the student Christian Society. The bible verse Matthew 18.20 – ‘For where two or three gather together in My name, there am I with them’ – had been amended. It now read: ‘*For where two or three gather together Not in My name, there am I with them. The State Security*’. This seemingly controversial note was up there for years without being taken down. Mittig concludes that everyone knew of surveillance, at least among Christians. Pastor Waschkowski recollects that as student he was often suspicious with regard to other students who did not quite seem to fit in. For example, if their family was not Christian, or, like Pastor Schmidt also noted, if they had had a very different job previously, such as in the East German army or as a biologist. Such suspicions were however often incorrect.

*For where two or three
gather together Not in
My name, there am I
with them.*

The State Security.

Speaking openly

Student pastor Mittig always told his students however that they should try not to suspect others of collaboration because that meant doing the MfS’s work for them: ‘*Then they don’t need to send anyone anymore. They should send someone though. He (sic) could well learn something from us here.*’ Many pastors talked about speaking openly; it was often called ‘responsible speech’. That means being accountable for what one said. Waschkowski explained it this way: ‘*yes, there is surveillance. But you, who I am talking to now, you I trust.*’ He added that he ensured that whatever he said, he would be happy to say again in a different context (for example, at a meeting with state authorities). He however also conceded, that he would certainly discuss the same topics when visiting West German friends, but he would use much stronger language.



Pastor Waschkowski at an event in his parish. Courtesy Dr Anselma Gallinat.

In the workplace

This study focuses on the knowledge East Germans gained about the Stasi through their social relations in the workplace. It focuses on people's owned enterprises (Volkseigene Betriebe/VEBs) in the former district (Bezirk) Gera. I conducted interviews with former GDR citizens who worked in different positions (blue- and white-collar) in various VEBs. I viewed files on specific VEBs at the Stasi Records Agency, and where personal files existed and the interviewee granted consent, I viewed these files too.



VEB Elektronik Gera 1984. Source: Bundesarchiv.

Presence of the Stasi at the workplace

Knowledge about the Stasi at the workplace varied among interviewees, depending on their position in a company and their closeness to the GDR state. When asked what one could know about the Stasi, Herr Kaiser replied succinctly: *'Well, [this] ... certainly depends on which position and occupation one had in the GDR. If I had been stood at the assembly line, then I would have possibly, if I had had no relatives and friends in the apparatus, not known very much. But I was a plant manager (Betriebsdirektor) in a large enterprise. Naturally, I knew ever so much about the state security.'* He explained that he was aware that two people concerned with matters of safety, order, and protection of classified information within the enterprise were also MfS, and that the personnel department (*Kaderabteilung*) frequently provided information to the MfS on request.

Other interviewees, especially those who were not SED members and/or who were blue collar workers, had very little factual knowledge about the Stasi at their workplace. Yet at the same time, they often suspected one of their colleagues to be a 'snitch'. Frau Fuchs, who was not a SED member, worked in the sales department of a large VEB that exported goods, including to 'non-socialist countries' like West Germany. Because of her position she was allowed to travel on business abroad, such as to large trade fairs. Such business travel was always conducted in groups, and she commented: *'Everyone knew that one of us reported [to the Stasi], we just didn't know who. I only knew, it wasn't me!'*



BSU-Kopie

Intuition/gut feeling on whom to trust

Some interviewees, especially those who already had a critical stance towards the GDR state, such as Christians, were careful with whom they socialised in their spare time or what topics they discussed openly at work. They often felt that a person's SED membership was a sign of state loyalty and therefore this person was not to be fully trusted. Many interviewees, however, made a clear distinction between SED and Stasi. Herr Pohl, who worked in a large VEB that also manufactured military equipment (and thus was especially in the focus of the Stasi) was not a SED-member but explained: *'We always distinguished in our head between party and Stasi, [...] We never drew a level: SED equals Stasi or vice versa. Well, Stasi always equals SED, obviously, they all had to be in it, but vice versa – no.'*

Like several other interviewees, he admits that he and his close colleagues suspected certain people at work to be 'snitches', but such unofficial Stasi informers were difficult to spot. Like several others, he claimed that people in the GDR had developed a gut feeling on whom to trust: *'There are simply expressions, reactions in certain situations. [...] There were speculations and everything.'* But when Herr Pohl viewed his Stasi file in the 1990s, his suspicions were not always confirmed.

Recruitment attempts

It was not uncommon for the MfS to seek to recruit people at the workplace to safeguard against, for example, theft or economic espionage or to improve production processes. They were also interested in what people at work thought about the state, politics, and whether they wanted to leave the GDR illegally. When he was in his late twenties, Herr Peters had worked in a VEB for a few years, he received a letter from the 'district conscription office' (*Kreiswehersatzamt*). He was summoned in relation to a check of his military service documents. Since he had already served in the military he presumed they wanted to draft him as a reserve. At the district conscription office Herr Peters quickly realised that the military officer who talked to him had a different agenda. He was a MfS officer and attempted to recruit Herr Peters to *'help support the MfS in maintaining safety and order in the VEB'*. This conversation was long, and Herr Peters calmly repeated over and over again that he was not interested in collaborating with the Stasi for three reasons: he didn't want to spy on his colleagues; that his Christian belief didn't permit him to speak badly about others; and that his personality was just not suited to this task. After roughly an hour the MfS gave up and made him sign an obligation to keep the meeting secret. Shaken by what had happened, when he returned home, he told his wife and a close friend about the recruitment attempt. He never experienced any repercussions for refusing to collaborate with the MfS.

The right to respond

This study looks at citizens in the GDR who clearly knew about the MfS. Some believed they had the right to approach and to challenge the MfS. Others believed they had a responsibility to work with them. These beliefs came from an understanding of what socialism in the GDR should be like. Sometimes these understandings were shared openly with others. We worked in various archives to look at the files of particular people and institutions in the GDR.

Public petition

The GDR had a system of what was called public petition (Eingaben). A citizen could write a letter of complaint, a request or a suggestion to any public body and had to receive an answer within four weeks. The MfS also received petitions because it was a public ministry. In some of these, people living near to MfS buildings in Hohen-



schönhausen wrote to complain about the MfS workers parking on the side streets and blocking the roads. Surprisingly, these letters are very critical about the MfS workers calling them arrogant and comparing them to the mafia! These letters had an effect. A new car park was built and the MfS staff were fined if they parked in the wrong place. This is one example that shows that people knew who to write to and thought that it was their right to complain.

One of the streets affected. Source: Street Shot Lössauer Straße .

Knowing who to contact (and where to find them)

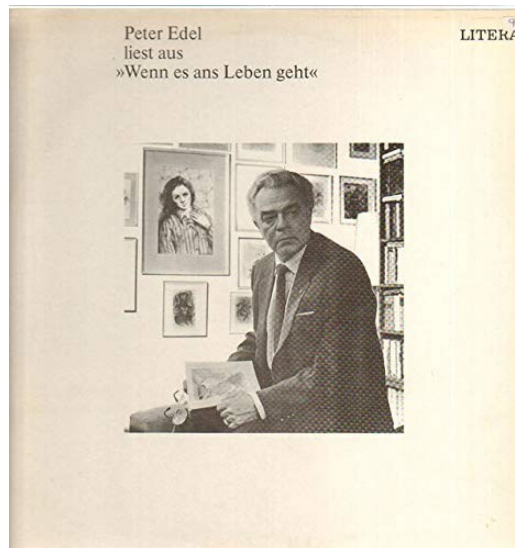
It was not only through letters that people contacted the MfS. Some also visited them in their offices. A Jewish Canadian journalist, Sydney Gordon, chose to move to Berlin in 1961 because he wanted to help build a socialist state. However, in 1970 he received phone calls and letters which he thought came from a Western security agency who wanted recruit him as a spy. So, what did he do? He went straight to the visitor reception of the regional headquarters of MfS HQ in Berlin and asked the MfS what they were going to do about it! Gordon went on to work for the MfS as an unofficial informer because he believed it was the right thing to do. He told his German partner all about what was happening and she also visited the regional headquarters to pass on a report that Gordon had written about the unwanted contact from the West.



Sidney Gordon,
Source: BstU MfS AIM
Nr. 17309/85 Vol. 1

Knowledge and political conviction

There were other people in the GDR who supported the MfS because of their political beliefs. These beliefs were often based on horrific past life experiences during Nazism. Peter Edel was one such man. He was a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz. He was a journalist, artist and best-selling author. In 1978 two MfS officers visited him and suggested he should become an 'official' unofficial collaborator. They wanted him to sign a document agreeing to this. Edel refused. He said that he didn't agree that helping the MfS should be done in secret. He said that he considered it his duty to help defend the GDR and that this should be done in the open. He said that it was his experience in the concentration camps that had led him to think like this and shook their hands.



Front cover of spoken word album, in which Peter Edel reads from his autobiography. Source: Litera Records, Photo courtesy of Alex Brown.

Abbreviations

BStU: Bundesbeauftragter für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR — Federal Agency for the Records of the State Security Service of the former GDR. (Stasi Records Agency)

FRG: Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany)

GDR: German Democratic Republic (East Germany)

IM: Unofficial employee (of the State Security Police) (informant; snitch; spy)

MfS: Ministry of State Security (Stasi)

SED: Sozialistische Einheitspartei—Socialist Unity Party; ruling party in the GDR

VEB: Volkseigener Betrieb—people owned enterprise

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