



## Coming to Terms through Cinema: *The Lives of Others* in Germany's Cultural Landscape of Memory

Jason James

University of Mary Washington

Email: jjames@umw.edu

### Abstract

*This article analyzes the popular, award-winning German film *The Lives of Others* as an intervention in memory politics focused on the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR). Confronting the crimes of the East German regime has been framed as coming to terms with Germany's "second dictatorship," suggesting an equivalence not only between the Nazi and socialist states and their abuses, but also the moral and historical stakes of facing up to the two legacies. *The Lives of Others* reinforces the "second dictatorship" discourse and fails to provide a nuanced portrayal of the GDR, opting instead for a moral drama that elides the political world it claims to represent. Drawing on ethnographic research on identity in Eastern Germany and critical readings of recent public discourse, I analyze claims about the film's authentic portrayal of GDR repression and its importance as a corrective to *Ostalgie* by situating *The Lives of Others* as a text and cultural phenomenon within the cultural landscape of post-socialist memory in Germany. This landscape, in turn, must be placed within the still broader context of national unification, identity, and memory in unified Germany. (Keywords: Germany; collective memory; film; Stasi; nostalgia)*

Over sixty years after the end of World War II, the task of coming to terms with National Socialism remains a thorny issue in Germany. For some the vitality of German democracy depends on awareness of National Socialism and the Holocaust; for others "the past that will not pass away" is an unhealthy fixation.<sup>1</sup> It should come as little surprise, then, that going on twenty years after the demise of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the socialist past and its commemoration should also be the focus of contestation. Indeed, the process of "mastering the past" (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) as applied to the GDR remains highly contested, in part precisely because the term—coined in the wake of World War II—has been applied to the GDR past. Confronting the crimes of the East German regime has been framed as coming to terms with Germany's "second dictatorship," suggesting an equivalence not only between the Nazi and socialist states and their abuses, but also the moral and historical stakes of facing up to the two

legacies. Indeed, the significance of engaging in a proper, unflinching *Bewältigung* of the East German past has taken on immense proportions because it is understood as a test of what Germans have learned through engagement (or lack thereof) with the Nazi past.

The struggle over confronting the GDR past has been waged on many fronts, including popular cinema. The internationally successful, award-winning feature film *The Lives of Others* (2007) focuses on the surveillance and intimidation of East German citizens by the secret police or *Stasi* (short for Ministerium für Staatssicherheit). The film has drawn praise for confronting uncomfortable truths about the GDR that other recent films avoid.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, writer and director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck has been joined by many critics in characterizing *The Lives of Others* as depicting "the way things really were" in the GDR, and thus as an antidote to other films' "whitewashing" (*Verharmlosung*) of the past with sentimental, trivializing depictions. Leander Haußmann's *Sonnenallee* (1999) and Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) are most frequently criticized in this context for both indulging in and further encouraging *Ostalgie*—a term that combines the words for "east" and "nostalgia" to describe East Germans' supposed sentimental attachment to the GDR. As a result, Donnersmarck's film has been hailed for provoking a renewed, more productive confrontation with the evils of the socialist regime.

Donnersmarck's assertion that *The Lives of Others* captures the GDR "as it really was" (Dale 2007:157) should set off alarms for any scholar concerned with issues of representation and collective memory, but my concern in this essay is not simply to point out exaggerations and inaccuracies. A number of reviewers have done so already, although some conclude by praising the film in spite of its flaws (see Ash 2007; Stein 2008). Drawing on ethnographic research on identity in Eastern Germany and critical readings of recent public discourse, I analyze claims about the film's authentic portrayal of GDR repression and its importance as a corrective to *Ostalgie* by situating *The Lives of Others* as a text and cultural phenomenon within the "cultural landscape of post-socialist memory" in Germany (Berdahl 2009a). This landscape, in turn, must be placed

within the still broader context of national unification, identity, and memory in unified Germany.

On balance the film's portrayal of the GDR is compromised by its treatment of the GDR and East Germans as fundamentally other to the "democratic" West German order. It does so by associating the GDR with the National Socialists, thus reiterating the "second dictatorship" discourse and reinforcing the entrenched practice of negative mirror-imaging in which the identity of the unified Federal Republic relies on an image of the East as its primary other. This othering depends on and reinforces clear moral boundaries between the GDR and its western counterpart, which effectively absorbed the GDR to become the unified Federal Republic of Germany, and between those who supported and resisted the socialist regime. *The Lives of Others* makes just this distinction—by painting a moral landscape in which characters are either morally redeemable or irredeemable according to their relationship to the socialist regime. In the end and perhaps most disturbingly, the film does these things not for the sake of enriching political discourse about the GDR, but rather in service of a compelling moral drama.

In the course of presenting a moral drama in the guise of a political one, the film fails to capture the banality of repression and the expansive gray area in which most East Germans maneuvered between compromise, complicity, and resistance.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the stirring but ultimately unconvincing "conversion" of a Stasi agent around which the film's narrative pivots ultimately serves to reinforce the moral divide according to which any effort to identify redemptive moments in GDR experience becomes evidence of East Germans' inferior capacity to confront the past. The very elements that make the film compelling as a moral drama make it highly problematic as a representation of the past and an intervention in debates about the legacy of the GDR.

### Synopsis

The year is 1984. The central characters of *The Lives of Others* include Georg Dreyman, a writer in the good graces of the regime, and his romantic partner, actress Christa-Maria Sieland. Even more central to the film's narrative, however, is Captain Gerd Wiesler, a Stasi officer who teaches interrogation techniques to recruits when he is not practicing them himself. We learn that despite his interrogation skills and devotion to the state and his job, Wiesler has lagged behind his peers in career advancement: unlike his superior, Lt. Colonel Anton Grubitz, he appears unwilling or unable to play the political games necessary to reach the higher ranks.

The narrative centers on Wiesler's conversion (German commentaries also use a Christian-inflected term,

*Bekehrung*): in the course of spying on Dreyman and Sieland, Wiesler goes from cold, ruthless agent utterly devoted to the task of rooting out subversive elements to someone who not only feels empathy for his victims, but betrays his superiors and puts himself at risk to protect them. Two factors seem to set this conversion in motion. First, Wiesler learns that his surveillance of Dreyman and Sieland's apartment has been ordered not for reasons of state security, but rather because of Culture Minister and Central Committee member Bruno Hempf's affair with Sieland: Hempf is able to extort sexual attention from her by threatening to ban her from the stage, but he is not able to win her affection. Hempf imagines that getting Dreyman out of the way will make this possible. Second, Wiesler becomes increasingly absorbed in the lives of Dreyman and Sieland, which contrast starkly with his lonely, colorless existence. Wiesler participates vicariously not only in their relationships, but also in their love of music and literature. He also becomes an admirer of Sieland, but his devotion contrasts starkly with Hempf's possessive lust.

In the end Wiesler is only partially successful, however, in protecting Dreyman and Sieland. As the film nears its dramatic climax, Wiesler is assigned to interrogate Sieland, who has been arrested on Hempf's orders after failing to appear for a scheduled rendezvous. Threatened again with being banned from the stage, Sieland betrays Dreyman, revealing the hiding place of a typewriter he used to write a magazine article critical of the regime. Wiesler manages to remove the typewriter only minutes before the other Stasi officers arrive at the apartment, but he is not able to prevent Sieland's suicide. Presumably motivated by guilt over betraying her lover, Sieland rushes from the apartment, into the street and the path of a truck.

The film closes some years after unification: Wiesler is shown delivering advertisements to apartment buildings, having apparently suffered for his association with the Stasi despite his noble actions. He sees a display for Dreyman's new novel in a bookstore window, goes in, and opens the cover to reveal the dedication: "To HW XXX/7, in gratitude." Dreyman has in the meantime learned of Wiesler's actions through his Stasi file, but chooses to use only his code name in the dedication. At the bookstore counter Wiesler is asked if he would like gift wrapping. "No," he replies, "it's for me." The shot freezes on Wiesler's face for a moment before fading to black.

### Moral Distinctions in *The Lives of Others*

My reading of *The Lives of Others* contradicts the interpretation offered by Mary Beth Stein, namely that its central characters exhibit significant ambiguity (see also Dueck 2008). According to Stein (2008:577), this ambiguity has

helped move discussion of the Stasi and the GDR past beyond the tired victim-perpetrator divide. This generous and hopeful reading overstates the film's complexity.

To be sure, the film's central characters are not one-dimensional or static. Dreyman, for example, is portrayed as essentially loyal to the regime and untroubled by the benefits that loyalty up to the point when a friend commits suicide in response to state persecution. Dreyman's partner Sieland also displays a degree of complexity, although Donnersmarck also gives her stereotypical female qualities. Her actions generally appear as a product of weakness rather than outright immorality.<sup>4</sup> She appears to overcome this weakness, however, in a highly dramatic scene when she chooses to stay at home with Dreyman rather than meet Minister Hempf at a hotel. Finally and most importantly, prior to his "conversion" the film's central figure Captain Wiesler appears intensely loyal to the regime. He exhibits no moral qualms about performing harsh interrogation techniques on behalf of the state, as well as training others to do so. Yet he ends up working against the regime and sacrificing his career for the sake of doing "the right thing."

These characters and the changes they undergo make for a compelling drama and account in no small measure for the film's popularity within and beyond Germany. At the same time, and this is quite telling, the unambiguously "bad" characters Colonel Grubitz and Minister Hempf do not change at all. Indeed, the victimhood and redeemability of Dreyman, Sieland, and (eventually) Wiesler are underscored through their juxtaposition with Grubitz and Hempf, who remain always unambiguously on the "unredeemable" side of the divide. The character of Minister Hempf exemplifies this. Similar to many cinematic representations of Nazis as psychopathic murderers with whom no identification is possible, the figure of Minister Hempf is fundamentally corrupt, ruthless, and repulsive. Literally a "fat cat" shown pawing at Sieland in the back of his limousine and later using the Stasi to take revenge on her, he embodies all that was wrong with the GDR.

Dreyman, Sieland, and Wiesler, in contrast invite identification from viewers (in Wiesler's case after his conversion). The ambiguities and transformations exhibited by Dreyman and Sieland in particular do not change the side of the redeemable/irredeemable, victim/perpetrator divide on which the film places them. The changes that do take place are in one direction and in themselves not ambiguous in their moral implications. Dreyman's character is redeemed as he goes from accommodating the regime to taking courageous action against it, publishing a critical piece in the West German magazine *Der Spiegel*. Although publishing the article is clearly a political act with potentially grave consequences, Dreyman's decision to do it is

portrayed as a response to the suicide of a close friend who had been blacklisted by Minister Hempf.

Although not portrayed as virtuous, Dreyman's partner Sieland enjoys the unambiguous moral status of the victim—a victim of Minister Hempf's advances and blackmail, and ultimately of her own weakness, epitomized by her drug addiction and her betrayal of Dreyman. The moral status of Sieland's character might nevertheless have remained less certain compared to Dreyman were it not for her tragic death, which is framed in unambiguously Christian terms that confirm her innocence. As the sole woman protagonist in the film, aptly named Christa-Maria, Sieland finds redemption through sacrifice: when Dreyman kneels and lifts her lifeless body from the street, repeating the plea "Forgive me," the scene clearly references the pieta.

Dreyman, Sieland, Colonel Grubitz, and Minister Hempf thus appear ultimately as redeemable or irredeemable, as victim or perpetrator. The crucial exception to this rule, of course, is Captain Wiesler. The opening scenes in which he conducts an interrogation and then instructs new recruits how to do so present him as cold, one whose life is devoted to serving the East German state. The only hint of vulnerability Wiesler displays in the first half of the film comes in the scene in which he betrays loneliness and sexual desire by hiring a prostitute. Yet this scene really serves to show that the strength of Wiesler's ideological commitment to the GDR stands in inverse proportion to the richness of his spiritual life and social connections. After his conversion, however, we find no trace of these character traits or allegiances. We encounter instead someone who longs for romantic love, someone easily enraptured by beautiful poetry and music—a real *Mensch* where there was not one before.

Donnersmarck claims that the inspiration for the film came in part from a claim attributed to Maxim Gorky that Lenin refused to listen to Beethoven's *Appassionata* because it produced tender feelings incompatible with the hardheartedness needed to make a revolution. Although commentators have both criticized and praised the film for giving the Stasi a "human face," the film actually implies that "Stasi" and "human" cannot coincide. Wiesler's humanity increases in the same proportion that he works against the Stasi and abandons his former devotion to the state. In the closing scene Wiesler is thus confirmed as having the sort of self-sacrificing moral virtue that does not require public recognition and is willing to accept personal suffering as a potential cost of "doing the right thing." Completing the Christian motif, Wiesler's conversion to the "good" side ends in his redemption.

Here, in my view, lies the reason for what many—even some who have praised the film—see as the implausibility of Wiesler's transformation. Despite Donnersmarck's

professed interest in the power of great art to humanize, the film's real point is not to explore how or why a Stasi agent would experience such a change of heart. To do so would have required a character with motivations much more complex than Wiesler exhibits, which would have in turn complicated the film's moral drama and lessened its appeal. What the film actually accomplishes is to dramatize Wiesler's "conversion" and moral divide that he traverses.

If one is inclined to see significant ambiguity in the film's characters despite all of this, it is worth highlighting the film's motif of "the good man." In a sequence pivotal to Wiesler's conversion, Dreyman talks with Sieland about his friend's suicide and then sits down at the piano to play a piece called "Sonata for a Good Man," the sheet music for which his friend had given him as a birthday gift shortly before his death.<sup>5</sup> As Dreyman plays we see Wiesler in the attic listening in, deeply moved by the music and by Dreyman's mourning. The motif returns at the end of the film: the novel that Dreyman dedicates to Wiesler carries the title *Sonata for a Good Man*. There is no trace of irony here. The film leaves no doubt that *gute Menschen* can be distinguished from bad ones, and that Dreyman and Wiesler fall into the category of "good man."

One can easily imagine a film with much greater and more troubling ambiguity: if, for example, Sieland had not just betrayed Dreyman in one instance under interrogation but had been an "unofficial collaborator" the whole time, or if Dreyman appeared initially as a cynic who actively courted the favor of figures like Hempf? What if Hempf, for his part, displayed real tenderness toward Sieland? And most importantly, what if Wiesler had sought to protect Dreyman and Sieland but then ceased to do so in order to preserve his own welfare or reaffirm his commitment to the GDR socialist project? My point here is not, of course, to suggest revisions to the script, but rather to highlight the degree to which moral ambiguities in *The Lives of Others* are not particularly deep or troubling.

The film's investment in offering compelling moral drama also means that the history and politics with which the film claims to engage are all but irrelevant. Donnersmarck's interest lies more in the realm of ostensibly universal themes rather than in the Stasi or the GDR per se. While the "goodness" of the good men in *The Lives of Others* springs from a humanism associated with romantic love, friendship, and art, the "badness" of the villains has in the end little to do with socialism or even "dictatorship." At best, the GDR appears worthy of condemnation in this drama because it made the abuse of power possible—because it was susceptible to cynical appropriation by some individuals. Indeed, the character most earnestly devoted to socialism, Wiesler, ends up rejecting it and becomes the film's hero. Wiesler's initial, appar-

ently sincere conviction that protecting socialism from its "enemies" justifies harsh interrogation and surveillance is in many ways more unsettling than the cynicism of Grubitz and Hempf, but no other character exhibits Wiesler's convictions.

This is not to say that the GDR leadership or the Stasi did not include "true believers" and cynics, but rather that the characters in *The Lives of Others* fall a little too neatly into one category or the other. This makes it much easier to take away a morally satisfying narrative of the GDR past since its gray areas and banalities, not to mention its politics in a broader sense, need not be explored in much depth. To be sure, as Ash (2007) points out, making a film that grappled seriously with the banality of evil without boring filmgoers is exceedingly difficult. Exploring how some East Germans supported the regime out of firm belief in the socialist project and despite its abuses would also be less compelling and could disturb the standard portrait of state repression and popular resistance.

But that is precisely the point. The film's overdrawn of moral distinctions and exclusive focus on the criminality of the Stasi have been noted by commentators like Ash and Stein as weaknesses, but in their view represent an acceptable price to pay given the film's otherwise powerful evocation of life in the late stages of a paranoid dictatorship. When viewed as a moment in the post-unification politics of identity and memory, however, the cost seems too great. *The Lives of Others* elides the political, perpetuates the discourse of GDR dictatorship, and reinforces East German otherness; in doing so it not only fails to disturb entrenched discourses about the Stasi and GDR, it reinforces a simplistic formula for settling accounts with the GDR past.

### Countering Ostalgie?

As noted above, *The Lives of Others* has been explicitly promoted by its director and hailed by critics as an important moment in the "working through" of the GDR past. The concomitant assertion is that other recent films about the GDR—especially *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* gloss over the real horrors of the regime as they reflect and nourish East German nostalgia and denial. Donnersmarck's film appears from this perspective as a laudable effort to resist dangerous tendencies toward distortion and forgetting.

Although ostensibly focused on the issue of grappling with another troubled past, such claims are at the same time very much about West and East German identity. Indeed, the claim that *The Lives of Others* provides a needed antidote for Ostalgie partakes of the same structure of meaning as claims that shaped relations between West and East Germany as well as the unification process.

In this structure of signification and identification, the East appears from the Western perspective as Other, a negative mirror image, and this tendency soon found expression in claims about East Germans' confrontation with the GDR past. The accusation of Ostalgie reinforces East Germans' alterity by suggesting that they remain fixated on the past but remain at the same time unwilling or unable to come to terms with the moral burdens of that past.

The notion that East Germans refuse to face up to their past seems to find support in the increasing frequency and confidence with which some former Stasi officers now appear in public venues, including tours of former Stasi facilities, and assert a version of the GDR past that justified their actions. A number of these officers have founded an organization called the *Insiderkomitee zur Förderung der kritischen Aneignung der Geschichte des MfS* (Insider Committee in Support of Critical Appropriation of the History of the Ministry for State Security), with a well-known web site called "MfS-Insider." Critics have described these former officers as refusing to admit (much less express regret over) any wrongdoing and continuing to insist that the citizens imprisoned in the GDR do not deserve recognition or sympathy because they engaged in criminal acts (Nolte 2006). Some members go so far as to claim that they should be regarded as heroes who acted honorably and helped to maintain peace (Lebert 2008; see also Reuth 2006). These officers have attracted significant attention in the national press, arguably in part because they can be treated as stark examples of a broader tendency among East Germans to distort the past. Although certainly unsettling, the widely publicized activities of some former Stasi hardly counts as evidence of widespread historical denial among East Germans.

If Ostalgie can be said to exist at all, it takes an extremely wide range of forms, from the ironic appropriation of East German fashions and products to efforts to displace the "dictatorship" narrative of the GDR (see Bach 2002; Berdahl 2009b; Blum 2000). Few East Germans who choose to recall positive aspects their lives between 1949 and 1989 actually wish for the return of the GDR. In this regard, East Germans can be usefully compared to immigrants: as Gareth Dale (2007:172) explains, an immigrant's feelings of nostalgia or longing for her native country are not taken as evidence that her sentiments extend to the government.

Whatever nostalgia may exist among East Germans is also very likely a response to the discourse of Eastern otherness. Efforts to combat Ostalgie encourage the embrace of Easternness; such efforts arguably created the "problem" they seek to solve. Indeed, the notion that a large section of the East German population denies the repressive nature of the GDR state or actually wishes for the return of that regime is arguably at bottom a West Ger-

man discourse about East Germans, and indirectly about themselves and the "democratic" Federal Republic. East Germans' supposed nostalgia raises the specter, in other words, of German forgetting; to the degree that Germans have been stigmatized for not only having supported Hitler but also failing to fully confront the Nazi past, the case of the GDR provokes anxiety that Germans may be repeating this failure. Mastering the GDR past can thus serve to demonstrate Germans'—especially more "democratic" Westerners'—willingness and ability to do so. Conflicts over engagement with the East German past concern not merely socialist wrongdoing, but also the broader history of Germans grappling with their burdened pasts and struggling to formulate an identity in which those pasts are acknowledged but not crippling.

*The Lives of Others* should thus be viewed not merely as a cinematic portrayal of GDR, but also as a significant intervention in the German politics of identification and commemoration. Indeed, Donnersmarck has received a great deal of praise for his explicit attempt to counteract the culture of nostalgia and denial that has supposedly taken hold among East Germans and made films like *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* so popular.<sup>6</sup> As Dale (2007:162) points out, however, not only was *Good Bye, Lenin!* made by a West German, it also joined *Sonnenallee* in responding to the mainly negative cinematic depictions of the GDR produced during the first ten years following unification. *The Lives of Others* actually reiterates a dominant narrative found in these earlier films as well as other venues. The Leipzig Forum for Contemporary History, to take a non-cinematic example, centers on "comparative dictatorship studies," adhering quite strictly to a narrative of the GDR past as a story of repression and resistance (Berdahl 2005).<sup>7</sup>

A more careful look at *Good Bye, Lenin!*, the most recent and most popular of the supposedly nostalgic films, reveals a good deal more complexity than the label Ostalgie allows. To be sure, the film does not place the repressive state apparatus of the GDR in the foreground. Yet its narrative exhibits greater complexity than the labels "sentimental" and "trivialization" suggest. It offers instead an elegiac portrayal of a world passing away—a world that also cannot be adequately captured as "dictatorship" or "Stasi." In doing so the film engages with the longing that accompanies a sense of loss experienced by many East Germans. The object of this longing is revealed to be not the GDR per se, however, but rather the GDR *as it might have been*. The film engages quite explicitly and ultimately playfully with issues of longing and illusion, approaching questions of representation and authenticity in a more nuanced fashion than *The Lives of Others* does.

The central characters in *Goodbye, Lenin!* are Alex Kerner, a young man in his late teens or early twenties, and

his mother Christiane, who is raising Alex and his sister alone. Alex's father, we learn, left the family and the GDR when Alex was still a boy and has not communicated with them since. Christiane appears to be a model GDR citizen, not only leading socialist youth groups but also devoting large amounts of time writing petitions to the government in hopes of rectifying problems such as limited footwear options.

The film places Alex and his family in East Berlin, 1989, just as the opposition movement has begun to stage public demonstrations. Christiane happens to pass by a demonstration in which Alex is participating and sees him being roughed up and arrested by the police. She collapses due to what turns out to be a heart attack, and wakes up months later, after the "unwinding" of the GDR is well underway. Christiane's doctor warns Alex and his sister that any stress might lead to a decline in her fragile condition. This means that, for the time being, she cannot be informed of the dramatic changes that have occurred. The rest of film follows Alex's increasingly elaborate attempts to replicate the GDR within the walls of his mother's bedroom, from searching for extinct consumer items like Spreewald pickles to producing home-made versions of GDR news programs.

As the dramatic changes taking place outside Christiane's bedroom become increasingly difficult to conceal, Alex effectively rewrites the fall of the wall such that the GDR opens its borders to West Germans seeking to escape capitalism rather than the other way around. In the meantime, however, Alex has taken advantage of the open border to visit his estranged father. He learns that his mother's devotion to the GDR was as much an illusion as the one he created in her bedroom: Alex's father remained in the West with the expectation that Christiane and the children would join him later, but she was overcome by fear and stayed in the GDR. Her enthusiasm for socialism, it turns out, was in reality a way of protecting herself and her children from a disturbing personal truth. In a voice-over during the final sequence following Christiane's death, Alex realizes he has created a GDR and unification story in the subjunctive—as he (and presumably others) would have liked them to have been (Hillman 2006).

*Good Bye, Lenin!* plays on tension between fantasy and reality in a way that pokes fun at Ostalgie even while it indulges in it. Just as the Spreewald pickles that Alex gives his mother are actually West German pickles in an East German jar, the various GDR brands now marketed to East Germans are made by West German concerns.<sup>8</sup> In this way the film not only acknowledges but even highlights the idealization of the past characteristic of nostalgia (Dale 2007). As Berdahl (2009a: 127) points out, this motif of appearance versus reality, fantasy versus fact resonates strongly with experiences of East Germans not only with respect to the GDR, but also the unified Federal Republic:

"...[T]he sense of promise and possibility contained in Alex's phantasmagorical recreation of a GDR that never existed accesses for many eastern Germans shared sentiments of loss and longing in the context of broken promises and disillusionments of re-unification." One aspect of this disillusionment concerns the (in)ability to represent and lay claim to one's own narratives of the past. Unification was experienced by both Easterners and Westerners as a wholesale negation not just of state socialism and the GDR leadership, but also of everything that transpired during four decades of socialist rule. East Germans encountered not only dramatic social and cultural change, but also an utter devaluation of their cultural and social capital. Identifying redeeming moments in the "failed experiment" of state socialism therefore serves not only to reclaim some of that capital, but also to recollect fragments of GDR experience that would otherwise be utterly effaced by the discourse of dictatorship.

The re-imagining of the GDR that occurs in *Good Bye, Lenin!* ultimately speaks not to a desire to retrieve it or undo the process of unification, but rather to bid farewell to identities and experiences associated with the GDR (Berdahl 2009a). Becker's film appears in this light as a kind of funerary ritual in which the redeeming qualities of the deceased are emphasized to facilitate letting go (although the film is also quite self-conscious and ultimately skeptical about this idealization). To be sure, not all East Germans feel the need to bid farewell in this way; the victims of the Stasi are surely less inclined to emphasize the positive aspects of the GDR for the sake of saying good bye. That many East Germans arguably embraced the film out of this need does not force the conclusion, however, that they also wish to deny the regime's oppression or the suffering of victims.

### Remembering the GDR as Other

The notion that large numbers of East Germans would welcome the return of the GDR says more about those making the accusation than those supposedly afflicted with this type of nostalgia (Boyer 2006). What it says is that East Germans are not only treated as carrying the burden of a tainted Germanness associated with dictatorship, but are also suspected of committing the additional crime of denial and forgetting. Filmmakers, authors, and everyday citizens often encounter fierce criticism if their portrayals of the GDR stop anywhere short of utter condemnation (see Lebert 2008). If anxiety around Germanness includes a fear of repeating the past nourished by an essentialist vision of a flawed German character, then East Germans get the blame not only for having recapitulated "dictatorship" but also for subsequent unwillingness to face up to their complicity in a "criminal" regime.

At work here is a continuation of what Borneman (1992) describes as “mirror imaging” between the western Federal Republic and the eastern GDR during the Cold War (see also Berdahl 2009b; Boyer 2006; Glaeser 2001). Most simply, each state used its counterpart as its defining and legitimating other by painting it as the true heir of National Socialism. After unification, which was generally conceived and implemented by Westerners as a moral victory, the GDR and East Germans have continued to serve this function. Frequent use of the term *Unrechtsstaat* to describe the GDR exhibits this mirroring most obviously (Borneman 1997:55). Coined specifically to refer to GDR criminality, this awkward term translates roughly as “the opposite of a state based on the rule of law” and pairs nicely with the term *Untaten* to describe the crimes of the regime (see Reuth 2006). At bottom it implies “the opposite of the Federal Republic of Germany” as *Rechtsstaat*.

With the old mirroring function still in place, East Germans' main role in unified Germany has become that of the nation's backward other, the “more German” Germans whose association with “dictatorship” serves to dissociate West Germans from a tainted, historically burdened past. Not only does this imply that West Germans have already finished with the business of coming to terms with and thereby distanced themselves from the Nazi past, it also completely effaces the question of whether the Federal Republic might be in any way implicated, at least indirectly, in the abuses of the East German regime (Kleßmann 1993).

*The Lives of Others* participates in negative mirror imaging most obviously through its singular emphasis on the Stasi and state repression, but it does so in subtler ways as well. A seemingly minor representational choice made by Donnersmarck betrays his endorsement of the “GDR equals Nazi regime” formula implied by “second dictatorship”: the opening scene of the film follows a handcuffed man being led by a Stasi officer down a long corridor in the infamous Hohenschönhausen prison. The uniform worn by the officer and later by Wiesler as he interrogates the suspect—especially the riding trousers and tall black boots—are not at all like the uniforms actually worn by the Stasi (Funder 2007). But they immediately evoke the stereotypical Nazi officer.

This detail would hardly be worth mentioning were it not for Donnersmarck's bold claims regarding the film's authenticity, which have been echoed by several commentators. In the commentary included on the DVD version sold in the U.S., Donnersmarck emphasizes the great pains taken to select a color scheme, furnishings, and other details to evoke the “feel” of the GDR in the 1980s. Several props, most notably the surveillance equipment used by Wiesler, are also proudly described as authentic GDR artifacts.

As is often the case in historical feature films, details such as these offer tokens of authenticity that distract from the questionable liberties taken in other areas. To claim that *The Lives of Others* represents an essential truth about life in the GDR not only vastly overestimates the film's representational power, it privileges the authenticity of some details over others that are arguably more important. Wiesler's protection of Dreyman and Sieland would have been difficult if not impossible, for example, due to the fact that Stasi officers never worked alone and practiced internal surveillance with as much vigor as that directed outside the ministry. Hempf's use of the Stasi for the sake of a sexual affair is also highly dubious (Dale 2007:158).

Most troubling is the film's association of Stasi with Gestapo, and thereby the GDR with the Nazi regime. Here too, writers such as Timothy Garton Ash (2007) who otherwise praise the film have noted that it reiterates the well-established but also fairly recent association between the two “dictatorships.” The fact that only limited details are needed to evoke this association reflects its very familiarity; even viewers not convinced that the equation is credible would still recognize it immediately. Donnersmarck's use of this cue, along with the broader agenda of the film to evoke life under dictatorship, make quite clear the degree to which the film participates in a well-established politics of memory and identity in which the GDR, not the West German or unified Federal Republic, stands as the real heir to the Nazi legacy.

### Settling Accounts

The representation of the GDR “dictatorship” in *The Lives of Others* has found wide acclaim in Germany not only because it reinforces the GDR's otherness, but also because in doing so it performs a fantasy of historical and moral reckoning. Its cinematic settling of accounts proves much more definitive and therefore satisfying than the actual process of mastering the GDR past has been. Legal processes focused on GDR criminality have failed to deliver a significant number of convictions, and the use of Stasi files to determine who collaborated with the regime has been similarly unsatisfying, in part because association with the Stasi serves as an easy albeit blunt criterion for collaboration with the regime (see Dale 2007:160).

Borneman (1997) argues that settling historical accounts through legal proceedings, as occurred in Germany after unification, offers acknowledgement and moral rehabilitation to victims while also reaffirming the rule of law: “Effective criminal law establishes the state as a moral agent representing the entire community. It does this by reiterating the principles of accountability for injustices as part of an attempt to reestablish the dignity of victims.” For Borneman, Germans' affirmation of accountability and

the rule of law goes a long way in explaining the lack of violence in East Germany following the fall of the socialist regime. The violence that broke out in other Eastern European countries might have been averted or lessened, he claims, by this sort of legal settling of accounts.

The rule of law may have retained legitimacy among East Germans following the processes initiated against GDR officials, but in subsequent years it has become clear that many have not embraced the unified state as a moral agent representing the national community. Many victims of the regime, for example, do not feel that they have been fully vindicated. Between 1990 and 2006, over twenty thousand investigations of former GDR officials (including Stasi officers and border guards) were initiated. But these investigations led to charges in only one thousand cases, which ended in three hundred convictions and only fifty prison sentences (Finger 2006). The courts in which these cases were tried have faced intense criticism on multiple fronts: for some the trials represent nothing more than arbitrary “victor’s justice,” while for others they reflect an unwillingness or inability to punish the guilty (McAdams 1996).

Given the small number of convictions in trials concerned with GDR criminality, the only vehicle for punishing complicity and compensating suffering was, for a time, the reduction of pension payments for former Stasi and party officials and an increase in payments to some of their victims. If the judicial proceedings are viewed as having parsed the historical record too carefully, the pension reduction was viewed by many as too blunt an instrument. The German Constitutional Court ruled that the so-called *Strafrente* or “penalty pension” amounted to punishment without conviction, although victims may find some moral satisfaction in their *Opferrente* or “victim pension” (Spiegel Online 2007).

Some critics have also expressed doubt about the unified state’s long-term commitment to confronting the GDR past through other institutions. Indeed, painting East Germans as avoiding confrontation with their tarnished past may serve among other things as a way of displacing blame for suspected shortcomings in the unified state’s own commitment to engaging with that past. As a case in point, a special commission recently concluded that many of the institutions devoted to documenting the GDR should strive to adopt a more “scientific” approach to the subject matter (Finger 2006a), but much to the frustration of those working in the institutions, the criticism was not accompanied by a plan to address what many regard as inadequate funding. Not only does this cast some doubt on the state’s commitment to facilitating East Germans’ “working through” of the GDR, it also points to diverging visions of what it means to do so. While the task force treated the problem as one of scientific research

and revelation, those working at sites like the former Stasi headquarters in Leipzig describe their mission as commemorating the past and offering victims a kind of moral redress by officially acknowledging their experiences of victimization. Here it seems as though a critique of East Germans’ “unscientific” approach to the GDR past actually threatens to undermine the work of settling accounts.

The process of settling accounts with the GDR past ultimately appears incomplete because clear moral distinctions prove difficult to sustain in the face of messy realities. A controversy involving actor Ulrich Mühe, who plays Captain Wiesler, offers an especially striking example of this: the news magazine *Focus* was prohibited from publishing an interview with Mühe in which he accused his ex-wife Jenny Gröllmann of having worked as an informer or “IM” (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* or “unofficial collaborator”) with the Stasi during their marriage (Osang 2007, Spiegel Online 2008). The court found that, given the significance of that accusation, the magazine offered insufficient evidence that Gröllmann knowingly collaborated. This followed a 2006 ruling that acknowledged some cause for suspicion in the Stasi files but barred Mühe from publicly declaring that his ex-wife was an IM. This dispute is only one of countless cases in which the effort to clearly define perpetrators and victims proves difficult if not impossible.

In this and many other cases, the famously copious Stasi files have been an extremely important but also less than fully reliable source of information on Stasi and IM activities (Borneman 1996:72ff). Even in cases where a person’s former Stasi collaboration has been proven, things often turn out to be more complex than one might hope. Lebert (2008) describes a case in which a pastor in Saxony discovered after unification that his neighbor informed on him, but clearly did not deliver the incriminating information the Stasi sought. This man is tainted by his former IM status. Yet the pastor does not regard him as a “bad” man, and one could argue that his actions were at the very least more virtuous than those of other collaborators who reported everything, or who even fabricated incriminating information. Cases such as this certainly bear some resemblance to the scenario presented in *The Lives of Others*, and yet these stories remain more ambiguous and mundane than Wiesler’s dramatic conversion.

Although affiliation with the party and the Stasi have been used to gauge proximity to the regime, ethnographic and historical studies have shown that East Germans engaged in varied forms and changing degrees of compromise, accommodation, and resistance. In her ethnography of the East German border village of Kella, Berdahl (1999:52ff) describes the ongoing negotiation and debate through which residents “made their peace” with the system. One way they did so was to distinguish between “red” and “really red” citizens, which roughly separated those

who joined the party and participated in the system simply to “get by,” advance their careers, earn extra income, avoid a less appealing duty, or to pursue hobbies (e.g. joining the party to be able to hunt), versus those who joined due to real belief in the system. Following unification, some villagers regarded as “really red” actually enjoyed considerable esteem because they stood by their former involvement. Others who actively participated in state organizations for pragmatic reasons later described themselves as having had no involvement. In the Eastern German city where I conducted research in the mid-1990s, such individuals were sometimes derided as *Wendehälse*, literally “neck-turners,” a reference to a species of bird that turns its head quickly from side to side when threatened. But those who spoke derisively of *Wendehälse* also expressed sympathy for those who reportedly made the difficult choice to work for the Stasi as part of a deal to eventually receive permission to leave the country.

The lack of moral clarity about the GDR past has been compounded by competing claims of injustice. The formula of GDR as *Unrechtsstaat* is thus particularly troubling to East Germans who feel that their treatment by the unified state has been anything but just. The unified Federal Republic's devotion to the rule of law has not, as they see it, guaranteed justice (see Lebert 2008). Among the East Germans I spoke with in the late 1990s, virtually no one expressed satisfaction with the process of mastering the GDR past, although the sources of their dissatisfaction varied. Many complained that most of “big guys” in the higher echelons of the party had not suffered much after unification, while people like themselves, including those who helped bring down the regime, had suffered a great deal. In describing the bitterness of many East Germans, many invoked the scenario of a former Stasi agent driving by a former victim in a “fat Mercedes,” having made a fortune selling insurance in unified Germany. Although probably apocryphal, this frequently repeated scenario expressed quite vividly the perception of injustice that still lingers among East Germans many years after unification.

This sense of injustice is inseparable from deep disillusionment among many Easterners over the economic and political inequality in unified Germany. Some people I interviewed insisted that in basic ways the system had stayed the same: the “little people” (among whom they counted themselves) had little say, while the powerful (some of whom they claimed were the powerful in the GDR too) “do what they want.” Stefan Richter, an electrician by trade who was quite active in the protests of 1989–90, described himself as angry about the way things turned out, concluding: “Before it was the Stasi watching you, now it's the federal tax agency.” Another man added, “You used to be afraid of the Stasi, now you have to be

afraid of unemployment.” Such sentiments are not without basis: the average unemployment rate in Germany's eastern states has remained quite high since unification, in some places reaching twenty percent. One result has been the depopulation of many Eastern villages and cities, with the majority of young people moving west in search of better prospects.

The GDR past thus remains highly controversial because different actors identify different “accounts” as in need of reckoning: while many West Germans and victims of the socialist regime insist that the criminality of the GDR regime and Stasi have not been fully addressed, other Easterners feel that the treatment of the GDR and East Germans during and after unification has been unjust but has not been acknowledged as such. By reiterating the GDR “dictatorship” story and presenting it as a corrective to *Ostalgie*, *Donnersmarck's* film works in effect to disqualify East German claims of unjust treatment by insisting that the Federal Republic saved East Germans from the “real” injustice of the GDR.

### Coming to Terms through Cinema?

That films like *The Lives of Others* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* have come to play important roles in the ongoing struggle over the GDR past comes as little surprise when we recall the significance of the American mini-series *Holocaust* and films like *Downfall* (2004) and *Schindler's List* (1993) in German engagements with National Socialism. Popular films offer something that academic history and judicial proceedings for the most part cannot: a settling of accounts through a narrative of the past that avoids the banality of repression and ultimately downplays the political in favor of the personal and “human.” When anchored to a moral drama, this in turn necessitates drawing clear moral distinctions—a boundary marked by characters who appear in the end either redeemable or irredeemable, characters with whom one can easily identify or regard as morally other.

This critique of *The Lives of Others* might appear ill-informed or too unforgiving in light of recent efforts by scholars of Germany to adopt a more nuanced perspective toward popular film as a means of addressing the nation's difficult pasts. Several contributors to a volume of essays about *Schindler's List*, for example, seek to move beyond dismissing the film as “Hollywood Holocaust” by questioning academic historians' claims to special authority and pointing out that scholarly works themselves employ representational strategies that complicate claims of objectivity (Zelizer 1997). And as Omer Bartov points out, the positive and negative effects of a film like *Schindler's List* (or *The Lives of Others*) should be evaluated separately from the quality of the film itself.

It is difficult to gauge the effects of *The Lives of Others* beyond noting that it generated intense debate about its own and other representations of the GDR, as well as the process of coming to terms with the GDR past and continued divisions between East and West Germans. It may be that the film's ultimately simplistic view of morality has provoked the response that a more nuanced view is needed, but it is by no means clear that this has been a widespread response. Donnersmarck's film has found such resonance, I argue, because it reaffirms these categories, thereby appearing to offer moral clarity and redemption where other ways of reckoning with the GDR have not. It offers a compelling narrative of the GDR past by casting it in personalized, melodramatic, sentimental terms—precisely those that supposedly disqualify films accused of indulging in nostalgia. This kind of narrative invites a disavowal of the political in favor of a story that fulfills the desire to draw a clear line—not between the past and the present, but rather between the redeemable and irredeemable, between perpetrator and victim, and between a defunct Unrechtsstaat GDR and the unified (Western) one that, by implication, guarantees justice: if not through its legal and political system, then through a continued insistence on the criminality of its historical other, the other Germany in the East.

### Endnotes

- 1 “The past that will not pass away” (*Eine Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will*) is the title of a 1986 article published by the German historian Ernst Nolte in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The article sparked what came to be known as the Historians' Debate or *Historikerstreit*.
- 2 Donnersmarck's film has been embraced as capturing the criminality of the GDR to the degree that images from it—particularly of the Stasi agent Wiesler listening in on the private lives of his victims—have been used to represent GDR “injustice” in news stories about the GDR past (Spiegel Online 2007).
- 3 As shown in more detail below, although the characters who fall on the “redeemable” side of the divide do maneuver within the system, the film's moral calculus largely negates the subtlety that this could contribute to the film. The aim of the film is not, I contend, to explore the gray areas that such maneuvering entailed for many everyday GDR citizens; by the end two of the three characters cast “redeemable” have worked to undermine the regime, and the other dies.
- 4 Creech (2009) sees the treatment of gender in the character of Sieland as closely tied to the film's vilification of the GDR.
- 5 This is the translation given in the subtitles of *Die Sonata vom guten Menschen*, but in my view the use of “for a”

does not convey the sense of the German, which suggests something closer to “Sonata for the good person.” The German therefore suggests a piece of music or story *about* the category of “good man” or “good person” rather than one for a particular “good person.”

6 See in particular Reinhard Mohr's (2006) review of *Das Leben der Anderen* in *Der Spiegel*. The term *Spreewaldgurke* in Mohr's title is a thinly veiled reference to *Good Bye, Lenin!*

7 The irony of the museum's strict demand that its guides adhere to the official narrative is striking given the socialist regime's own strict control of historical narratives. Even more ironic is the fact that employees interviewed by Berdahl reported not only pressure to conform to the official narrative, but also an atmosphere of fear and suspicion not unlike the GDR (2005:160).

8 Jennifer Kapczynski (2007) characterizes *Good Bye, Lenin!* as nostalgic not just for the GDR, but also for undisturbed, childlike attachment to the nation. Longing for an untainted, uncompromised national identity certainly occurs in Germany (see *author reference*). It is not limited to East Germans, although they may experience this desire with greater intensity due to the additional burdens of Germaness they are made to carry. In *Good Bye, Lenin!*, however, the nostalgia associated with GDR consumer products, for example, reveals something more complex than a longing for national attachment. These products, like other aspects of quotidian life in the GDR, bear association with the nation but also with everyday experiences whose meaning exceeds that of national belonging.

### References

- Ash, Timothy Garton  
2007 “The Stasi on Our Minds” *The New York Review of Books* 54(9) <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20210>, accessed 9 January 2008.
- Bach, Jonathan  
2002 “The Taste Remains”: Consumption, (N)ostalgia, and the Production of East Germany *Public Culture* 14(3): 545–56.
- Bartov, Omer  
1997 “Spielberg's Oskar: Hollywood Tries Evil” in Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on *Schindler's List* Y. Loshitsky (ed) 41–60.
- Berdahl, Daphne  
2005 “Expressions of Experience and Experiences of Expression: Museum Re-Presentations of GDR History” *Anthropology and Humanism* 30(2):156–170.

- 2009a "Goodbye Lenin, Aufwiedersehen GDR: On the Social Life of Socialism" in *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany* M. Bunzl (ed) 123–133.
- 2009b "(N)Ostalgie for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things" in *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany* M. Bunzl (ed) 48–59.
- Blum, Martin  
2000 "Remaking the East German Past: Ostalgie, Identity, and Material Culture" *Journal of Popular Culture* 34(3):229–53.
- Borneman, John  
1992 *Belonging in the Two Berlins: Kin, Sate, Nation* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.  
1997 *Settling Accounts: Violence, Justice, and Accountability in Postsocialist Europe* Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Boyer, Dominic  
2006 "Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany" *Public Culture* 18(2):361–381.
- Creech, Jennifer  
2009 "A Few Good Men: Gender, Ideology, and Narrative Politics in *The Lives of Others* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*" *Women in German Yearbook* 25:100–26.
- Dueck, Cheryl  
2008 "The Humanization of the Stasi in *Das Leben der Anderen*" *German Studies Review* 31(3):599–609.
- Finger, Evelyn  
2006a "Lieber zu spät als nie: Die Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur wird Staatsziel" *Zeit Online* (21) [http://www.zeit.de/2006/21/Spitze\\_21\\_xml](http://www.zeit.de/2006/21/Spitze_21_xml), accessed 25 October 2008.  
2006b "Was war die DDR? Und was soll von ihr bleiben?" *Zeit Online* (27) <http://www.zeit.de/2006/27/gedenkst-ttereportage>, accessed 25 October 2008.
- Funder, Anna  
2007 "Tyranny of Terror" *The Guardian* 5 May 2007 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/may/05/featuresreviews.guardianreview1>, accessed 6 January 2009.
- Glaeser, Andreas  
2001 "Conclusion: Why Germany Remains Divided" in *A New Germany in a New Europe* T. Herzog and S. Gilman (eds.) New York: Routledge.
- Hillman, Roger  
2006 "Goodbye Lenin (2003): History in the Subjunctive" *Rethinking History* 10 (2):221–237.
- Kapczynski, Jennifer M.  
2007 "Negotiating Nostalgia: The GDR Past in *Berlin is Germany* and *Goodbye, Lenin!*" *The Germanic Review* 82(1):78–100.
- Kleßmann, Christoph  
1993 "The Burden of the Past in the Two German States" *Studies in GDR Culture and Society* 11/12:195–209.
- Lebert, Stephan  
2008 "Land ohne Gedächtnis: Tag der Einheit" *Die Zeit* (41):17.
- Lewis, Alison  
1995 "Unity Begins Together: Analyzing the Trauma of German Unification" *New German Critique* 64:135–59.
- McAdams, A. James  
1996 "The Honecker Trial: The East German Past and the German Future" *The Review of Politics* 58(1):53–80.
- Mohr, Reinhard  
2006 "Das Leben der Anderen: Stasi ohne Spree-waldgurke" *Spiegel Online* 15 March 2006 <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/0,1518,406092,00.html>, accessed 14 March 2010.
- Nickerson, Colin  
2006 "German Film Prompts Open Debate on Stasi." *The Boston Globe* 29 May [http://www.boston.com/news/world/europe/articles/2006/05/29/german\\_film\\_prompts\\_open\\_debate\\_on\\_stasi?mode=PF](http://www.boston.com/news/world/europe/articles/2006/05/29/german_film_prompts_open_debate_on_stasi?mode=PF), accessed 9 January 2008.
- Nolte, Barbara.  
2006 "Die Stasi-Rentner." *Zeit Online* (30), electronic document: <http://www.zeit.de/2006/30/Stasi>, accessed 25 October 2008.
- Osang, Alexander  
2007 "Das Leben neben dem anderen" *Der Spiegel* (10):178–184.
- Reuth, Ralf Georg  
2006 "Stasi-Kader heute: Mit Märchenstunden und satten Renten in eine rosige Zukunft" *Welt Online* 23 April [http://www.welt.de/print-wams/article141103/Stasi\\_Kader\\_heute\\_Mit\\_Maerchenstunden\\_und\\_satten\\_Renten\\_in\\_eine\\_rosige\\_Zukunft.html](http://www.welt.de/print-wams/article141103/Stasi_Kader_heute_Mit_Maerchenstunden_und_satten_Renten_in_eine_rosige_Zukunft.html), accessed 9 January 2008.
- Spiegel Online  
2007 "Neue Opferrente für politisch Verfolgte in der DDR" *Spiegel Online* 28 August 2007 <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,502450,00.html>, accessed 25 October 2008.

- 2008 "Jenny-Gröllmann-Urteil: Gericht erklärt Stasi-Vorwurf für unzulässig" *Spiegel Online* 18 April 2008 <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/0,1518,548286,00.html> accessed 25 October 2008.
- Stein, Mary Beth  
2008 "Stasi with a Human Face? Ambiguity in *Das Leben der Anderen*" *German Studies Review* 31(3): 567–79.
- Zelizer, Barbie  
1997 "Every Once in a While" in Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on *Schindler's List* Y. Loshitsky (ed) 18–35.