Dealing with a Stasi Past

In the autumn of 1989, following a period of crippling depression, after years of remaining silent, a great number of men and women began to protest against a fossilized dictatorship no longer able to persuade its citizens that it was doing its job—taking care of the people’s welfare. The lavish celebrations laid on by the evil old men at the top for the fortieth anniversary of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was, in the beginning, accompanied only by small-scale protest from splinter opposition groups. However, the hard line taken by the state authorities against these protesters resulted in a sudden wave of solidarity, particularly evident within the churches. Civil movements were formed, and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) was refounded in an East German vicarage. The protest, initially heard at church services and similar Protestant gatherings, soon emerged from the churches and spilled out onto the streets.

The courageous protesters of Leipzig were symbolic of the rebirth of citizenship. It was a heady period for all who for decades had been forced to keep their heads down. The weekly demonstrations, in towns large and small, and the catalog of demands for human and personal rights and for radical political change became more and more determined. These protests culminated eventually in growing demands for German reunification; not because the Easterners had suddenly become nationalists, but because in this manner they were most clearly able to express their desire to turn away from socialism.

Joachim Gauck is Federal Commissioner for Documents of the State Security Service of the former GDR.
The street protests in my home town of Rostock were fairly typical: they were regularly held in front of the local State Security Service (Stasi) offices. There we were able to do away with long discussions about ideology. By simply pointing at the edifice, so to speak, we were able to present the real character of the "socialist" system for popular judgment. The decision was clear—the Stasi and tank socialism were on the way out. The Stasi, the prime instrument of oppression, was to be the first victim. "Put the Stasi men to work in the factories" was the rallying cry of the protesting masses. After that, the demonstrations were directed against the Party's branch offices. The protesters outside the Stasi buildings were especially determined, word having gone around that enormous numbers of documents were being destroyed. The revolutionaries knew how important it was to save this data, the old regime's hold over its former subjects. It was expected that political use of these materials would one day be made.

In early December 1989, a decision was made to occupy the Stasi regional centers. Unfortunately, the main office in Berlin-Lichtenberg was not reached until January 15, 1990, which gave the Stasi officers six weeks longer than elsewhere to destroy vital material. Thousands of paper sacks full of shredded or damaged dossiers testified to the zeal of those fearful of the typewritten evidence of their activities. All over the GDR civil committees were formed to supervise the winding-up of the secret police, to guard documents, and, where possible, to collate the files they found. Many of these groups produced pamphlets on Stasi activities, edited Stasi materials, and from time to time informed the press that someone seemingly destined for high political office had worked closely with the MfS (the official short form for the Stasi).

Following the first free elections in the postcommunist GDR (in March 1990), the parliament, the Volkskammer, decided at a very early stage that all MPs should be vetted to see whether they figured in Stasi records as Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter (IM, undercover collaborators). A special parliamentary committee was set up for this purpose. Later, another committee was formed, and the author of this article (at that time an MP representing the civil movement called "Bündnis 90") was elected to be its chairman. This body's task was to supervise the breakup of the MfS, which took place on the orders of the Minister of the Interior. The committee also
influenced legislation; it presented a draft bill that became law in August 1990 that fixed the methods for dealing with the Stasi legacy. This law took up many of the themes of the 1990 civil protests; its main thrust was to allow former Stasi documents to be used for “political, judicial, and historical reckoning with the past.” Each citizen was to be allowed to examine his or her own file to discover if and how the Stasi had acted. The East German parliament's intention was to return the former rulers’ instrument of knowledge to those it had ruled and oppressed. “Political reckoning with the past” (politische Aufarbeitung) meant, among other things, the right to vet MPs and all elected bodies, as well as public employees, to see if they had previously worked for the MfS, either as Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter or even as Hauptamtliche (full-time collaborators). Where the vetting process revealed such collaboration, the MP or public servant was to be dismissed from his post.

Why did the East Germans decide to embark upon this process in 1989? It was not a quest for vengeance; there was no majority in the Volkskammer for such vindictive action. On the contrary, the MPs recognized the following problem: In East Germany, from 1933 onwards (i.e., the start of the Nazi dictatorship), the entire public administration, government, and parliament had been largely comprised of people who, to a greater or lesser extent, had collaborated with the antidemocratic rulers. They included judges, lawyers, police, teachers, university professors, and other representatives of the federal and regional legislature and executive offices. If, after more than fifty-five years of Nazi and Communist dictatorship, citizens were to trust elected officials under the new democratic system, it was important that those officials be trustworthy. The intention was not to remove former Communists (members of the Socialist Unity Party, SED) from all posts, but rather to respond to the East German people’s minimal demand that persons who had conspired with the regime, unbeknown to their fellow citizens, should be deemed unsuitable for public positions of trust.

Following the establishment of a democratic state in East Germany, only a few full-time state employees attempted to reenter public service; those without such a handicap, on the other hand, applied in large numbers for posts, including major political jobs. The screening process was never designed to deprive individuals of employment; former high officials were allowed to work in business
and the professions, as a doctor or an artist, for example, but not
in the service of the democratic state. The Stasi files were to be used
for “judicial reckoning with the past” in order to facilitate prosecu-
tion where crimes had been committed, but also to vindicate those
who had been wrongly accused. Finally, there was a historical
justification for this legislation. With the aid of the files, historians
would be able to portray the actual processes of domination and
organization, demonstrating the interplay between the ruling party
and its instruments of surveillance and oppression.

The bill passed by the Volkskammer in August 1990, which
contained these three essential features, was welcomed by the over-
whelming majority of the public, regardless of political affiliation.
For many MPs the decision to make a clean breast of their country’s
dark past was linked to a desire to do so in an open, self-critical
way, very different from the situation following the end of World
War II. This time, collaboration, failure, and guilt would not be
suppressed; it would be acknowledged, faced up to.

The sheer speed of the German reunification meant that this bill’s
life was short-lived. While the Unification Treaty contained clauses
restricting freedoms in this regard (for example, taking away a
citizen’s right to view his file), use of the files was allowed in
principle and the Act declared that, following reunification, the new
pan-German parliament would adopt a bill restoring most of the
features of the Volkskammer law. The German Bundestag com-
plied with this declaration in 1991 in the “Act concerning the
Documents of the State Security Service of the Former German
Democratic Republic” (“Stasiunterlagengesetz”), which came into
effect at the end of that year. Since 1992, a surprisingly large
number of individuals and institutions have made use of their legal
options.

The Federal Commissioner for Documents of the State Security
Service of the former GDR (my official title) and the body that
bears the same name began work on German Unity Day. The
Commission is specifically enjoined to work towards the above-
named objectives, but also to facilitate the press’s constituitional-
regulated access to the Stasi files (excluding only those relating to
victims). It has more than three thousand staff members, divided
between the main office in Berlin and fourteen branches in the five
East German federal states. The need for such a high level of
Dealing with a Stasi Past

manpower is dictated by the enormity of the archives (almost 120 miles of shelves) and the number of applications for access to the files. More than 1.85 million requests for access have been made, over 650,000 by private citizens wishing to see their own files.

The Commission's main activities consist of providing data for the public service, preserving and arranging the archive. In 1989-1990, the data was in total disarray; the archivists' main task was to create a reliable archive, reconstructing dossiers completely or partially destroyed. Since the electronic data bases had been wiped out on the orders of the Modrow transitional government, the archive section has the urgent task of sorting, reconstructing, and completing the card-indexes, the principal means for linking names to files. Another principal objective, likely to gain significance in the coming years, is provided by the education and research department, where requests from historians and press research applications are processed. This department's task is to inform the public about Stasi structure and methods of operation by publishing books aimed both at laymen and experts, by holding seminars on the Stasi, and by organizing exhibitions held in Berlin and in the new federal states.

* * *

There has been for some time now a feeling of unease about this digging up of the past. It is less marked in East German public opinion, and rather more conspicuous in certain media dominated by the "old West." This unease is clearly caused by many factors. Some individuals are simply averse to the media treatment of the issue. For a long time, the public was bombarded with reports about the Stasi. In many cases, particularly where political, cultural, religious, or sports personalities were reported as having been Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter (IM), there was, especially in the tabloid press, overgeneralized and sensationalist treatment. This, along with oversaturation, caused public frustration and confusion. It is important for readers in the West to realize that the East German secret service had many different methods for recruiting and guiding IM.

As a rule, the IM undertook to collaborate with the MfS by means of a written or oral statement. But, in the case of a small group of intellectuals and churchmen, the Stasi's rules allowed for
a more circumspect recruiting method. "Confidential talks" were arranged which, after a time, were held in secret ("adhering to the rules of conspiracy," as the MfS termed it) by agreement between the two parties. This agreement was typical for the initiation of an IM dossier of this special type. Persons recruited in this way often did not know the term "IM," received no money or presents, apart from birthday gifts, did not intend to betray anyone, and continue today to reject vehemently the charge of collaboration uncovered by the examination of the files. They consider themselves untainted by their past, choosing to forget that they fully accepted long-term contact with a Stasi officer, kept the relationship secret, acquiesced in a role rejected by others in comparable positions in the East. They fail to see also that the Stasi, very naturally, pursued its own interests in processing the data gleaned from the IM, that such information was used, regardless of the supplier's motives, to support the regime's hold over its subjects.

While such collaboration must be distinguished in the public mind from real treachery and espionage, in many cases sensationalist witch-hunting reports (never based on the work of the Federal Government Commission) precluded such a distinction being made. It contributed to the frustration expressed by many. Apart from the special problem of media coverage, there are, of course, other political objections to the German method of dealing openly with the past. Let us consider, for example, the interests of those removed from public posts who understandably protest such action. In the universities, to cite a single instance, some of the IM would prefer that the public regard the special treatment they received as a result of their collaboration with the MfS as quite irrelevant. They often do not grasp the fact that they are quite correctly being compared with their East German colleagues who did not allow themselves to be drawn into working with the Stasi. Many seek support at home and abroad, claiming that West German attempts to dominate the East following on reunification cost them their jobs. This sort of argument needs to be approached with extreme caution. While West German "neocolonialism" does take place from time to time, the investigation of public servants for Stasi collaboration is a result of pressure from the East German democracy movement, legalized by two German parliaments, and cannot be explained as a Machiavellian scheme by the old Federal Republic.
Dealing with a Stasi Past

It is important to note that such protests are often taken up or favorably reported by West German politicians, journalists, and scholars who, in earlier contacts with the East and in their appraisal of Eastern politics, demonstrated a high level of support for the GDR, often refusing to perceive what was really going on there. In this way, from time to time, alliances are created between former Ossis and Wessis whose common interest lies in their fear of being compelled to acknowledge past mistakes, or sometimes to admit past guilt.

The attempt to deal with the Stasi past reflects the wish, at least partially, to bridge the gap that existed in the former GDR between “us” and “them,” the people and the elite. The majority of the oppressed and spied-upon population had a legitimate interest in publicizing the Stasi files. They hoped that the new knowledge would have consequences. The minority, the collaborators, were to be disadvantaged, a justifiable result, given the advantages they had enjoyed in the past.

In united Germany, the (Western) majority is not sufficiently aware of this discrepancy; it is very apparent to all in the East. The new German contradictions (the East-West postunification tensions, but also to a great degree the political party discrepancies) have drowned out the old ones. We find it difficult to comprehend fully the history of individuals who have had different experiences of suffering and alienation. Many East Germans today have great difficulties in explaining their very different past lives to West German countrymen. The gap is too wide, the burdens borne over long decades are too unequal. And if it turns out that their Eastern neighbors were indeed oppressed and discriminated against, many Westerners draw back, wishing to protect themselves from the suffering of others. They cannot begin to grasp the magnitude of what was experienced under a totalitarian system; they try to equate the injustice and shortage in Communist countries with what they themselves experienced under democracy.

It is perhaps normal that not everyone is able to understand the emancipatory approach we politicians in the East use in order to rake over the ashes of the recent past. Some accuse those who refuse to forget of being vengeful. They fail to see that there is a need to remember the times and those who restricted our right to freedom and personal expression, not least because these inalienable rights
need to be defended now and in the future. The present-day dissension need not be seen as precluding reconciliation and inner stability. We will be in a position to forgive and forget only if we are given enough time and the right to heal our wounds, to calm our anger, and, yes, to curb our hatred. Reconciliation with such a past can only be achieved not simply through grief, but also through discussion and dialogue.

If this fact was not evident to all Germans after the fall of Nazism, we ought to welcome the changed situation that now makes it possible. However, any foreign reader who thinks that our way of coming to terms with the past is too strict and too organized must realize a simple truth: only in such a distinctively German way can a dictatorship set up on the German model be destroyed.

Translated by
Martin Fry