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ONE HUNDRED MILES OF LIVES: THE STASI FILES AS A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF EAST GERMANY

MOLLY ANDREWS

There is a wonderful cartoon of the legendary Andy Capp, in which his wife puts her hand over the telephone receiver and says to him – as he stands glaring at her – ‘it’s not gossip . . . it’s oral history.’ Particularly in the last two decades, oral history has generated a great deal of talk about ‘people’s history’ or history from below, history, not as it is seen through the lives of royalty and the signing of great treatises, but rather as it is lived and experienced by ordinary folk. If we knew more about the fabric of the lives of Mr and Mrs Smith, it is argued, we might increase our ability to discern the underlying meaning of a particular historical event, or even era. A guiding assumption about ‘people’s history’ is that it empowers ‘the people’ simply because they are at the centre of it.



However, an examination of one particular case, that of the East German secret police, reveals that there must be more to a people’s history than mere documentation of ‘ordinary’ people’s lives, if it is to achieve its purported function. *The Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* – the ‘MfS’ or ‘Stasi’ – was designed to be the ‘sword and shield of the [Communist] Party’ and as such, it closely monitored every aspect of society, weeding out ‘bad germs’ in order to protect what was perceived to be the good of the whole. Operating on the premises of such a justification, the Stasi kept records on the lives of one quarter of its population of sixteen million.¹ The Stasi had approximately 125,000 full-time employees, and an additional 100,000 informants.² Of the official, full-time employees, 1,052 were ‘surveillance specialists’ who tapped telephones, 2,100 steamed open letters, and 5,000 followed suspects,³ thus earning their internal slogan ‘We are Everywhere.’ Since 1980, the size of the MfS had doubled, working towards its ultimate goal of ‘the perfection of an espionage network that would cover every citizen in the GDR’.⁴ The Stasi owned 2,037 buildings, apartments and country houses, 652 in East Berlin alone. In addition, they had twenty-four vacation spas as well as exclusive hospitals and sports facilities exclusively for MfS employees. They even had their own barbers and grocers. The annual budget for the MfS was 3.6 billion marks, or approximately two billion dollars, calculated at its internal GDR value.⁵

It is not at all surprising that with the changes of 1989, the Stasi, with its history of flagrant abuse of civil rights, served as a focal point for the citizens’ movement seeking to dismantle the remnants of the old system. On 4 December, 1989, exactly one month after the critical demonstration of over half a million people in Alexanderplatz, East Berlin, protesters occupied the Stasi offices in Leipzig. On 15 January, the East Berlin Stasi headquarters were ransacked. During the months which followed, there were various occupations of the MfS offices, with demonstrators demanding to see their files. Finally in November 1991, two years after the wall had been opened, the government of a now unified Germany passed legislation allowing persons access to their files, but leaving the original commission which had been set up to supervise the files to decide on any publication of records. An estimated 20 per cent of the files were

destroyed during the upheavals, including all of the MfS computer files, but what remains is one hundred miles worth of material.⁶ Interestingly, though, these papers, however meticulous and thorough they may be (and all indications are that they are both), somehow fail to communicate the essence of the lives they describe.

I moved to Berlin in February 1992 one month after the files had officially been opened. I was there researching the psychological impact of acute social change on political actors. In the course of the following six months, I conducted in-depth interviews with forty women and men, all of whom had been involved with the 'bloodless revolution' of Autumn 1989. Most of the respondents had been leaders in the (underground) citizens' movement for a long time, others were involved in the arts and had helped to organize the 4 November demonstration, some were affiliated with the church (a critical player in negotiations between the citizens' groups and the state), and some were lifetime members of the Communist Party who had expressed their criticism of the state from within this powerful organization. Two of the forty had been official employees of the Stasi who, at the time of our interviews, were forming an 'insider's committee' as they called it, gathering together persons like themselves who had worked for the MfS, who wished to discuss and analyse the past. The interviews were primarily in East Berlin, with about one quarter of them taking place in Leipzig.

I had not intended my research to focus on questions of the Stasi, but because of the timing of my data collection, it was virtually impossible not to explore this topic which was of such central importance to the people with whom I was speaking. Most of the respondents had submitted applications to see their Stasi files, and indeed many had already viewed them. (Their applications had been given priority because of their history of resistance against the state – an assurance for having a file.) Thus it was that I had the opportunity to speak with people about what it felt like to read their files. Were the files accurate? Could they indeed recognize their own lives as they had been documented, in some cases over many years? All of the meetings, even those of a most private nature, noted? Who said what to whom, what they wore,



where they stood, how they moved? Did they see themselves in these detailed accounts?

Irene Kukutz, one of the founders of Women for Peace (in the early eighties) and of New Forum (the largest of the opposition groups which mushroomed in Autumn 1989), was one of the first East Germans to read her Stasi file. Although it had been stipulated that files must be read only by individuals, on the second day that the files were open to the public, she and three other women disregarded this and insisted on viewing their files together. She explains the reasoning behind their determination: 'We are all in the files together, and we are going to look at them together!' She describes her reaction to reading her file:

It represents a kind of healing process, this . . . hm, this fog and mysteriousness clears up and there lie the papers which, partially, are ridiculous, depressing but also . . . hm, unreal. At last one sees it and can view it factually.

Would you think that the files are really true?

Not that one can say that they are untrue or forged, I mean in the sense of false. But of course they do not reflect our real lives. And that is reassuring somehow. We were seen through their spectacles, we and the others. And through male spectacles for a start. At first they did not take us seriously, were always looking for the male in the background who manipulated us, because they thought that women were not capable of acting on their own. Well and later . . . hm . . . they took notice of us (laughs).



Virtually the only remaining portions of the wall, now considered to be something of an outdoor museum.

Notably, Kukutz does not criticize the files on the grounds of the information they contain; their factual content is neither 'untrue' nor 'forged.' Nonetheless, she asserts that 'they do not reflect our real lives.' The explanatory lens which her observers use to make sense of her actions is so fundamentally different from her own, she does not see herself in the descriptions she reads. For Kukutz, this is reassuring. In some sense she is less invaded, because the web of meaning which underlies her behaviour has gone undetected. Interestingly, because the Stasi was so certain that Women for Peace was a tool of some male political activist(s), the group was allowed to operate, virtually unimpaird by the state, for much longer than would otherwise have been the case. Indeed, the Stasi codename for this group was 'die Wespes' – the wasps – indicating their regard for them as irritating, if not formidable. Meanwhile, the MfS pursued a red herring, a victim of its own narrow-mindedness, searching for what it was certain existed, but which did not: the men behind the scenes, plotting and controlling the actions of this women's group.

Others who have read their Stasi files report similar reactions to that of Kukutz. Frederic Pryor was a doctoral student at Yale University who was living in West Berlin between 1959 and 1961, writing his dissertation on the foreign trade system of the Soviet bloc system. He ended up spending half a year in the Stasi Investigation Prison Hohenschonhausen on suspicion of espionage. When he applied to see his Stasi file, he learned that they had accumulated 5,000 pages of material on him. He describes what he saw:

The Stasi was preparing a legal document to be used against me at a trial, and the reports did not indulge in a great deal of speculation or hysterical accusations. Rather, most of these materials were factual and sober.⁸

Pryor's cell mate throughout his stay at the prison worked for the Stasi, and he alone submitted more than 350 pages of handwritten reports. Pryor explains that however impressive these reports were in terms of detail, they were nonetheless lacking in insight.

. . . my cell mate latched onto the idea that I was collecting information for the preparation of a foreign trade blockade of the GDR . . . a perfect example of crack-pot realism. Once he had this 'insight', he tried to fit everything into its framework.⁹

Thus his experience of reading his file was in important ways similar to that of Kukutz. Pryor writes 'this was a prison run by bureaucrats, not philosophers'¹⁰; while they were very capable at recording the minutiae of his life, they failed to discern the deeper structure of meaning which held it all together.

I listen to the feelings expressed by Kukutz and Pryor with particular interest, asking myself how many times oral historians are guilty of the personal trespassing they describe. Moreover, how many of the people who we

interview would recognize themselves in the detailed accounts we write about their lives and the contexts in which they live them? How often do we misperceive the web of meaning which underlies the words and actions we so studiously record? While there are many clear distinctions between the work of an oral historian and that of a Stasi informant, the potential similarities are rather disturbing. It is this uncomfortable grey area which we shall examine more thoroughly here.

Reinhard Weissshuhn was also one of the first people allowed to look at his file. He had been involved with the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights, one of the key human rights organisations in East Germany, since its inception in 1985. This group, which necessarily operated underground, consisted of twenty members, ten of which it subsequently emerged were Stasi informers. In our interview, I ask him why this group was considered to be such a threat, as it was so small and so thoroughly infiltrated. 'No, it is the other way round' he explains. 'Because the state felt threatened, it did everything possible to get so many informers into this group.' Weissshuhn himself had been accused of collaborating with the Stasi. 'I wanted to clear my name, that's why I applied for this check up. And then I was invited, almost as one of the first, to inspect the files.' There was no evidence in his files to support the accusation, and Weissshuhn explains 'It was a rumour, no more. A rumour spread by the Stasi themselves. It was very typical. Yes, even still in 1990.'

Weissshuhn's story reveals an inherent trust in the veracity of the files. Surely no one knows better than he himself whether he did or did not collaborate with the secret police. By applying to see his file in order to clear his name, he is implicitly putting great stock by what is contained in the file itself. Weissshuhn comments on the truthfulness of the files.

Are there wrong accusations in these files? Did what they say you did correspond with what you knew you did?

I don't know of anybody whose files lie. The authors now lie, still now. They contradict the files . . . The files are more honest than their authors. Now.

When Weissshuhn punctuates the end of his thought with the word 'now,' he draws a distinction between the past and present actions of the authors of the files. When the authors were acting in their capacity as authors, that is to say when they were actually writing the files, their documentation was reliable; now other circumstances prevail, and the authors fabricate stories about the lives of those whom they observed.¹¹ This claim makes sense when one considers the timing of events. Despite the disbanding of the MfS, former employees of that organisation continue to function as an active, if covert and not unified, force in the society.¹² After the dissolution of East Germany, many of them may well have

perpetrated rumours which they knew to have no basis; the vindictive motivation of such behaviour would have been to thrust the society into deeper chaos, and to try to sully the reputation of long-standing foes. However, at the time that informers were compiling their reports, there would have been no motivation for them to falsify information which was written exclusively for their own organisation. Thus it is that although 20 per cent of the files were destroyed during the transitional months, there have been virtually no reports of falsification; either they were destroyed or they were left unaltered.¹³

Jorg Seidel was an official employee of the MfS (he does not use the term 'Stasi'). Indeed, he believes that most citizens of the GDR never knew of the existence of the MfS, and that therefore the term Stasi 'was not so much in use because most people didn't have any contact with [it].' As evidence of this claim, which he repeats several times in our interview, he offers the example that 'in the media and in the press, and in [popular] films, the subject of the CIA was stirred so frequently . . . but there was no mention of the activities of the MfS.' (He never seems to consider that there might be alternative explanations for this fact.) His observation contrasts with most empirical work on the subject, including my own. Wollé comments on the 'poison of universal fear and mutual distrust' created by the Stasi, explaining that while 'nobody really knew for sure how far the Stasi's tentacles reached' this only increased, rather than diminished, the effect it had on the shaping of their lives. During the course of my data collection, I heard many stories which provided evidence of this. On one occasion, my interpreter in Leipzig, a house squatter in her early twenties, indicated to me, while we were bicycling through the streets of Leipzig, exactly where Stasi 'hidden cameras' had been located. She told me that when she and her friends used to ride by these places they would wave to the cameras. 'Whether you were cowardly or courageous, the Stasi was always in the back of your mind' Wollé writes. These fears were not unfounded; 'the reality which was gradually uncovered when the system ended exceeded even the most outrageous rumours and wildest imaginings.'¹⁵

Thus my reaction to hearing Seidel's claim that the East German population had been generally ignorant about the existence of the Stasi was to question his capabilities as a perceptive observer of others around him. And yet, this was his very specialisation. Seidel's specific responsibility was to spy on the American spies in East Germany. I ask him to describe the responsibilities of his job, and he responds:

I had to know all the details of the life of the CIA man, including the most intimate sphere. I had to know this by heart, like my second life. . . . I had to know their biography. And I had also to know their psychological attitudes so I could know how would they behave, how would they act, how would they think.

I was sensitive to the difficulties of trying to understand someone whose language I did not speak, for that precisely described the situation I found myself in.¹⁶ I knew from our interview together that Seidel had virtually no familiarity with the English language. I was finding it hard enough to communicate with others, even through a translator, and I did not have the added challenge of the demand for secrecy. I asked him how he overcame this obstacle, to which he responded: 'The advantage was that my American colleagues spoke excellent German.' I found this a curious comment; whereas my own difficulties in communication would have been largely ameliorated by such a condition, I could not see how this would substantially help him. Seidel had no direct contact with the person whose life he was meant to document – and crucially, the CIA agent had no interest in making himself understood to Seidel, a vital consideration for effective communication – so under what circumstances could his command of German have been of assistance to Seidel?

Seidel's evident commitment to the utility of positivist methods for conducting case studies is striking to a social scientist such as myself. He seems to believe that by merely observing the external behaviour of his American counterpart, he will be able to discern the deeper recesses of human personality. One would imagine that this would be particularly challenging as he cannot understand the native language of the person whom he is meant to observe. (Presumably key communications of the CIA agent were conducted in English). Seidel's attempt to derive inferences about thought processes by relying exclusively upon the observation of external behaviour inverts the Weberian concept of *verstehen*, or 'interpretative understanding,' which lies at the root of much life history research. According to this framework, social scientists should try to put themselves into the position of others in order to discern what meaning they ascribe to their actions. Seidel need not be a trained researcher – which he decidedly is not – to deduce that behaviour observation is a rather limited method to use to uncover personality structure. Its shortcomings are evident in stories such as the one told by Irene Kukutz earlier; although her behaviour had been accurately observed and documented, the observer had failed to perceive the meaning of the actions from her point of view, and consequently the quality of his work, as measured by its efficiency in achieving its own intended purpose, had suffered.

Seidel had to know more than the mere biography of 'the CIA man'; he had to know 'how would they behave, how would they act, how would they think'. This comment raises important questions for life historians. To what extent is it ever possible to discern the psychological attitudes of a person who one does not really know, and in some cases will never even meet? Exactly what criteria are necessary to be able to depict a life which is not one's own? Of course Seidel's work

was very different from that of most of the informal collaborators, in that the latter group did indeed have the opportunity to speak, often at great length, to the person whom they were meant to be observing. Thus, for instance, the ten Stasi collaborators in the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights, of which Weissshuhn was a member, had ample opportunity to speak with him on all sorts of issues. Presumably the reports they in turn wrote about those conversations were different in nature and quality to anything which Seidel could offer about a man with whom he had never so much as exchanged a word.



The shredding device at the Stasi Headquarters in Leipzig.

There were, however, other situations in which MfS employees had the opportunity to speak directly with the person for whom they were responsible, and that person, in turn, was aware of the identity of the interviewer (that is an employee of the secret police). Such was the case in prison, where persons who offered resistance to state authority were often kept. Werner Fischer was one of these people. One of the leading activists of the underground citizens' movement, and also a member of the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights, after the changes of 1989, Fischer was the person designated to dissolve the Stasi. People like Fischer, who were taken into custody regularly, had assigned to them special interrogators. The way in which Fischer describes his relationship with the man he calls, with almost friendly overtones, 'meinem Vernehmer', 'my interrogator,' is intriguing. Fischer tells of conversations he has had with him since the changes of 1989. I ask him:

When you said 'what did you do?' [after finishing his interrogations with Fischer and going home to his wife and family], what was his response?

This provokes from Fischer a long rumination on the relationship as it had built up over time:

We had known each other from previous interrogations and a kind of relationship had developed between us. You know how far this went . . . well, in a way I quite liked him. In fact, they chose the interrogators for every opposition member very carefully. They knew our profiles and to whom we would respond. As I said, I almost liked him, a highly intelligent chap, very clever, with whom I could . . . I often told him, 'You know under different circumstances I would love to have a pint with you'.

Indeed, since that time they have done so. They are not friends, but they are 'on familiar terms.' Fischer says that he was often brought in, in order to be detained from certain meetings, and on each of these occasions he spoke with his interrogator. 'When I asked him "tell me, this is nonsense, what are we going to talk about?" he would shrug his shoulders and reply "well, we have to once more."' The regularity of these meetings produced, not surprisingly, a familiarity between the two men, but one which was nevertheless very unbalanced in terms of the things which they knew about each other. It is in the same sequence of thoughts described above that Fischer tells me:

He knew everything about me, whilst I knew nothing about him. I could assess him by his appearance, I would notice that he had been to the barber, or that he was married, he had a wedding ring, and he loved wearing a new tie every day. So much so that, when I was in London¹⁷ I found myself browsing through Harrods' tie department and choosing a tie for him.

The relationship between interrogator and interrogated, as described by Fischer, was characterized by a peculiar kind of understanding. Fischer used every observable detail about his interrogator to piece together information about him. The interrogator, for his part, did not need to rely so heavily on such measures, as in their meetings, he was the one who held the power, the person who asked, not answered, the questions. This, combined with his access to Fischer's file, ensured that 'he knew everything about [him]'. Crucially, however, Fischer only participated in these meetings against his will: any comments he made would have been tailored for the ears of the security police. Such an 'interview' is thus most likely to produce heavily edited and – wherever possible – falsified data.

Thus far we have discussed three different kinds of stories, each to do with gathering information about another person's life. Irene Kukutz and Reinhard Weissshuhn describe situations in which they were being spied upon, both by persons who they knew and did not know. For each of them, the information which they read in their files did not contradict their own perception

of the facts. However, at least Kukutz did not find her files convincing as a representation of the texture of her life, as she herself experienced it. In the second kind of story, Jorg Seidel attempted to get information about another's life, in this case the CIA spy located in East Germany, by merely watching him, and making psychological inferences from his observable behaviour. Finally, the third kind of story involved no spying, but rather a series of involuntary interrogations.

How do these stories compare with more standard procedures for the gathering of life stories? The only fundamental similarity between them is an obvious one: the Stasi employees and collaborators share with other life history researchers an interest in detailed information about a particular individual, in order to construct a composite picture of that person's life. The Stasi's multifarious ways of gathering information about individuals' lives (opening mail, wire-tapping homes and telephones, and behaviour observations) can, in a perverse light, be regarded as evidence of triangulated data, much in the way that other life historians utilise multiple sources of information to evaluate material.¹⁸ The triangulation of data, however, guarantees neither the quality nor the ethical grounding of the data. There are at least two critical differences between the scenarios described here and standard use of life history method. First, there is absolutely no concern whatsoever with the rights of the person whose life is being recorded. This lack of consent is important not only for ethical reasons, but also as a factor to be considered when evaluating the quality of the data. Second, the MfS was not a research institute, at least not in any conventional sense of the term. The purpose of data collection was very specifically tied to the interests of the state, and this informed every aspect of the work. Thus, what might in other circumstances be constructed as compromise in the research design could be justified if it furthered this end.

There is another way in which the Stasi files differ from more standard life histories. Whereas a good life history is written in such a way as to engage the reader, to communicate as effectively as possible not only the facts but also the texture of the subject's life, the very opposite is true with the personal dossiers of the MfS. Wolle comments on the 'poverty of language, the formulaic word choice, the preference for abbreviations and low level of reflection' which characterise the files. He explains that

All authors of reports were told to avoid any expression of opinion. They were only to report the facts as concisely as possible . . . Even reports intended to describe a general atmosphere were frequently more stiff accounts of unconnected individual facts to which the author accorded neither weight nor meaning. The system of total surveillance began at this level to perpetuate itself *ad absurdum*.¹⁹

The effect of this was not only that the files were,

by all accounts, staggeringly lacking in anything resembling style.²⁰ This ultimate de-personalisation of both the observed and the observer in an area which is quintessentially personal – the documenting of people's lives – meant that by definition the reports could not serve the function for which they had been created. Human lives are, after all, composed of more than a series of facts. It is this that the Stasi, for all of its attention to the minutia of daily life, failed to comprehend, and it is for this reason that people like Irene Kukutz fail to recognise themselves in the accounts of their lives which they read in their Stasi file, however accurate the information contained therein may be.

Life history research, when conducted for the purpose of securing state control over the lives of its citizens, is not only morally reprehensible; it makes for bad research. The reason is simple. Such 'research' is guided by the premise that there is a very limited range of acceptable ways in which people live their lives. Jorg Seidel believes that one of the key questions of his job was 'for whom am I doing this work?' He is right about this; as any researcher knows, considerations of who is sponsoring a project and why they are sponsoring it must always be taken into account when deliberating applying for grants. In Seidel's case, the MfS, as the 'sponsoring institution' as it were, occupied a commanding role not only in the collection of the data (specifying who should be observed and how) but crucially in its analysis (determining the meaning of what they documented). Thus Wolle comments that 'the intellectual narrowness [of the MfS reports] is shocking. Nevertheless, some of the details are interesting.'²¹ The MfS excelled in data collection, but its analysis was faulty. Employees and collaborators of the Stasi could not 'see' what was before them, because it did not adhere to their expectations of what comprises a life. Just as the people who documented the activities of Women for Peace were blind to the reality which they confronted because it differed from what they thought they would find, so it is always true that unless a researcher is open to the unexpected, she will greatly limit the potential of her findings. And so the Stasi employees and collaborators dutifully reported everything they saw and heard, but they were never able to capture the essence of the lives they observed.

The stories which I heard in my months in East Germany provoked in me a wide range of thoughts and feelings: personal, political and professional. Time and again I was forced to challenge aspects about myself and my professional identity. How, I wondered, was I also complicit in distancing myself from difficult ethical issues? When can we ever be confident with the presentations we offer of others' lives? How can we successfully resolve the tension between understanding and moral judgment?²² These are issues which are and will continue to be of ongoing concern, for they are central to the work of a good oral historian.

Amongst the many questions which this sensitive

situation raised for me was, what role, if any, did real oral history play in the lives of East Germans? Because the East German state had such a rigid formulation of what the lives of 'the people' should consist of (both in terms of beliefs and behaviour), the only institution which could conceivably be trusted with conducting life histories was that of 'the sword and the shield of the Party'. That which was documented could never pose a threat to the state's conception of itself or of its population, because it was written within its own terms, processing every scenario through its own lens of meaning-making. Thus the language of Marxism continued to be employed long after the practices of the state ceased to bear any relationship to the concepts of Marxism. In Autumn 1989, when protesters rallied around the cry 'We are the People,' they were telling the authorities that they did not accept the official version of reality offered to them by the state: they did not believe that the state represented the interests of the people. In taking to the streets, they were attempting to reclaim the authorship of their own lives.

In this context, it is understandable why the East German government would regard the practice of oral history as a threat to the state. Lutz Niethammer comments that in East Germany, 'oral history was regarded by the party hierarchy as a subversive instrument to arouse the retarded mentality of the people against the conscience of the established avant garde.'²³ Wolfgang Herzberg is generally regarded as the first oral historian in East Germany. The tale of his journey to become an oral historian is woven throughout our interview together. First, he begins by describing the 'long, long process' of distancing himself from his parents – Jews who had lost family in the Holocaust and who had returned to Germany to build a new country. This distancing was, he says, 'very painful.'

This is where the pain comes from?

I can pin it down to this, the other things are thousands of experiences . . . It has always been difficult for me to find my own subject . . . I had this desire. I wanted to get to know reality . . . This was a constant drive within me, it was always there in my life, this will to get nearer reality and away from ideology. This is why I came to oral history . . . Then I tried to write a dissertation. But I was not sure whether I was a scientist or an artist. I did not have the courage to give my work a title . . . I went to a psychotherapist and said 'I must write this dissertation.' And he told me I should write small sections. I said 'I can't.' Because I always asked myself what happened in reality. . . Then I tried to write another dissertation . . . I had great difficulties. I couldn't do it. Again I went to see a psychotherapist. 'Help' I said, but he could not help.

Herzberg's words reveal a man struggling to uncover

'reality' in a society which views such a pursuit as dangerous. In order to 'get nearer reality and away from ideology' as he wished to do, Herzberg settled on listening to versions of reality as described by others – the work of oral history. When others speak, 'it is like a bannister I can hold on to'. How often do we oral historians use the words and thoughts of those who we listen to as a guide into our own thoughts, as a bannister? In Herzberg's case, the importance of this function was particularly heightened because of the repressive context within which it operated. The 'oral history' of the Stasi supplanted one reality (that of the actor) with another (that of the observer), whereas for Herzberg, oral history was a vehicle which allowed him to explore and document not only the external world, but his relationship to it.

The second dissertation which Herzberg refers to in the passage cited above was the first project of its kind in the GDR: twenty-five in-depth interviews with workers in an electric light-bulb factory, resulting in more than 3,000 pages of transcriptions. Herzberg says that he 'enjoyed doing the interviews, but could not evaluate them scientifically'. He couldn't write 'because [he] asked [himself] what happened in reality' and the answers he heard, observed, and breathed were not the same as the reality described, and prescribed, by the state. He says he did not have 'the courage' to give his work a name, for in so doing he would be identifying what he saw. Being open to hearing, witnessing and experiencing a new reality is itself a political act. It is understandable why Herzberg had difficulty finding a job. His work was considered 'too risky, against ideology'.

Throughout the interview, Herzberg speaks about his concept of history, and his aversion to ideology. What does he mean by this term 'history' which peppers the rhetoric of state socialism? 'History is for me basically millions of life stories. And I enjoy reading about social history. It is a means of avoiding an ideological approach to history'. He describes his interest in his work: 'to understand history . . . where it comes from and where it goes'. For Herzberg, the guiding motivation behind his work is 'to get to know reality.' Herzberg takes the concept of 'the people' very seriously; it is their stories which, when combined together in space and time, are the stuff of history.

But the Stasi files – gathered in order to ensure 'an ideological approach to history' – do document the lives of millions. Are they not one of the most extensive examples which exist of a real people's history? The sheer quantity of material generated by the Stasi in the forty years of state socialism provides historians with a virtually unique opportunity to piece together the fabric of life of a whole society. For this reason, historians around the world pleaded that the files not be destroyed, claiming that they contained much of historical significance. But although these files of the people were created by the people, their function was never to serve the interests of the people. Moreover, the means used to gather

the records was not only unethical but methodologically unsophisticated, if not flawed. The Stasi files are not good life histories, precisely because they fail to capture the essence of the lives they record. Still, they are life histories, and the information contained in them is true.

The one hundred miles of Stasi files, documenting, amongst other things, the lives of one-quarter of the East German population, is a people's history which was used with great effect to disempower the people. It is a people's history with neither conscience nor soul.

Notes

- ¹ John Feffer, *Shock Waves: Eastern Europe After the Revolutions*, South End Press, 1992, p 82.
- ² Dirk Philippsen, *We Were the People: Voices from East Germany's Revolutionary Autumn of 1989*, Duke University Press, 1993, p10.
- ³ Robert Darnton, *Berlin Journal 1989-1990*, W. W. Norton & Co., 1991, p 125.
- ⁴ Darnton, *Berlin Journal*, p 125.
- ⁵ John Borneman, *After the Wall: East Meets West in the New Berlin*, Basic Books, 1991, p 157.
- ⁶ Feffer, 1992, p82. Stefan Wolle, who has worked in the Archives of the MfS, has reported a similar figure. The full extent of the files is estimated at 170 running kilometers (just over 105 miles), with 30 kilometers of that containing personal dossiers (See Stefan Wolle, 'The Poisoned Society: the Stasi File Syndrome in the Former GDR' *History Workshop*, no 33, Spring 1992.) The personal files, which have dominated media coverage of the Stasi, thus represent only a small portion of the existing material and are, Wolle asserts, 'for the most part only of interest for research as examples' (p 141)
- ⁷ I personally have never seen any Stasi files. The law which was passed in November 1991 granted individuals the right of access to their own files, exclusively. Thus, this essay is based on what interviewees have told me about their files, rather than any direct impression which I might have formed had I been able to read the material myself.
- ⁸ Frederic L Pryor "On Reading My Stasi Files", *The National Interest*, Winter 1994/95, vol 1, p 75. For another rich account of reactions to reading Stasi files see Timothy Garton Ash, *The File: A Personal History*, Harper Collins, 1997. Ash compares his own diary entries with Stasi observation reports: "The "object" described with the cold outward eye of the secret policeman and my own subjective, allusive, emotional self-description. But what a gift to memory is a Stasi file. Far better than Proust's Madeleine." (p 10).
- ⁹ Pryor, "On Reading My Stasi Files", p 77.
- ¹⁰ Pryor, "On Reading My Stasi File", p 76.
- ¹¹ The point raised by Weisshuhn here has interesting implications for those comparing the relative reliability of oral and written testimony. Stasi collaborators were for the most part unable to gain access to the files they had authored after the political tides had turned. Thus, while the stories they tell have changed quite significantly in this time, their text has remained constant. The written data, however, is not invulnerable: it was written by a particular person, in a particular environment, with a particular purpose and for a particular audience.
- ¹² In the course of my interviews, I heard several different accounts of ways in which civil rights' activists were still being harassed by former employees of the Stasi. One such account related to a series of death threats received over the telephone. Katja Havemann, long-term civil rights' activist and widow of Robert Havemann, symbol of East German opposition, explains the motivation behind such actions: 'We are the living guilty conscience . . . They can't forgive us for what they did to us.'
- ¹³ This contrasts with the situation in some other Eastern bloc countries. In Czechoslovakia, for instance, the consequence of the comparatively more gradual take over of the offices of the StB, the security police, resulted in much more rampant falsification of files. See Lawrence Weschler's, 'The Velvet Purge: The Trials of Jan Kavan', *The New Yorker*, October 19, 1992, pp 66-96.
- ¹⁴ Seidel strongly rejects what he sees as the unjustified condemnation of the MfS, an organisation whose work, he feels, has been severely distorted by the mass media. He describes the ideas which motivated him and his colleagues: 'I will say we are thinking of a human who is really in the center of the interests of the society... This means equal rights, equal opportunities for the development of everyone.' Throughout the interview, he makes his feelings clear: 'I do not want to apologise for the activities of the MfS which have taken place.'
- ¹⁵ Stefan Wolle, 'The Poisoned Society', 1992, p 139.
- ¹⁶ See Molly Andrews, 'A Monoglot Working Abroad: Working Through Problems of Translation', *Oral History*, vol 23 no 2, Autumn 1995 for a discussion of the issues raised by the situation.
- ¹⁷ As a result of his part in the Rosa Luxemburg demonstration in January 1988, Fischer was exiled from East Germany for six months.
- ¹⁸ Wolle, too, implicitly compares the MfS to other institutional research settings. He writes: 'The lack of an empirical sociology in the GDR has often been lamented, but the Stasi engaged in just that' (p 142).
- ¹⁹ Stefan Wolle, 1992, p 141.
- ²⁰ Pryor describes the Stasi as 'a formidable bureaucracy that even had its own language; to allow me to understand what I read in my Stasi file, the specialist who handled my case gave me a list of over twenty pages of abbreviations used in the reports' (Pryor, p 75).
- ²¹ Stefan Wolle, 1992, p 143.
- ²² For a very thoughtful discussion of this conflict, see Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors* New York: Basic Books, 1986, p 13.
- ²³ Lutz Niethammer, 'Where Were You on 17 June?' in Luisa Passerini (ed.), *Memory and Totalitarianism*, Oxford University Press, 1992, p 69.