

Betrayal of Interpersonal Trust by *Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter* in the German Democratic Republic: *Mein Gott, hilf mir, diese tödliche Liebe zu überleben*

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Abstract

Following the post-World War II division of Germany, the communist, single-party regime of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) maintained authority through the Ministry of State Security (Stasi), which itself employed an expansive network of unofficial collaborators (*Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter*) to gather intelligence on suspected dissidents. Collaborators often spied on loved ones, raising the question of what variables would result in social decision-making that valued the state above friends and family. When the models proposed by Stevens and Fiske (1995), Sternberg (1986), and Laursen and Faur (2022) are applied to the context of East German society, certain situational and personal factors begin to emerge that increased vulnerability to social pressure applied by the Stasi. The recruitment of collaborators created a general sense of paranoia that permeated all facets of life in the GDR, which essentially created a positive feedback loop of distress, the effects of which are still apparent today, after German reunification.

Keywords

East Germany, German Democratic Republic, social decision-making, trust, interpersonal relationships

Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, one of the most dramatic consequences for Germany was its division into two separately controlled entities. The Western half fell under the control of the Allied forces (the United States, the United Kingdom, and later France) and would eventually combine into the capitalist Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), while the Eastern half fell under the Soviet sphere of influence and became the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR). As the GDR became increasingly insulated, the two entities became what would later be described as “a natural experiment” (Fricke, Pannenberg, & Wedow, 2015, p. 6), with the FRG acting as the control group with which to compare the GDR’s four-decade treatment regimen of Marxism-Leninism, imposed by the Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED), and the “Sword and Shield” of the Party, the Ministry of State Security (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, also known as the MfS, or more frequently, the “Stasi”).

To carry out its mission, the Stasi employed an expansive network of unofficial collaborators (*Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter*, IMs), who would meet regularly with officers to provide information about neighbors, coworkers, and even friends, family, and partners. Attempted recruitment was not universally successful, however, and this raises the question of what factors determined whether a prospective IM would betray the trust of their loved ones. Thus, this literature review has two goals: first, it will explore both societal factors specific to the regime of the GDR that prevented strong interpersonal bonds from forming, as well as personal factors that rendered some individuals more likely to cooperate with the Stasi than others; and secondly, it will demonstrate that the GDR was an egregious example of how totalitarian governments can take advantage of applied psychology against their own people, in order to maintain their absolute grasp on power.

The Sociopolitical Context of Post-World War II Germany

To understand the motivations of the Stasi, however, one must first understand its roots in Bolshevism. Following the Russian Revolution of November 1917, the new government formed a secret police force (commonly referred to as the *Cheka*) in order to maintain totalitarian control and repression of dissidence (Bruce, 2003). Post-WWII, when the Soviet Union gained control over the eastern half of Germany, it modeled the new secret police unit after its own. Among the newly created departments was K-5, the equivalent of the modern-day “Internal Affairs” department (Bruce, 2003). Around the same time, the USSR began using threats and intimidation to force the fusion of the Moscow-backed *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* and the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) into the Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED) in order to prevent rivalry between the two, and the SED eventually became the single-party regime of the GDR (Bruce, 2003).

After the SED culled itself of former SPD members who objected to the merger, President Wilhelm Pieck and SED Chairman Walter Ulbricht traveled to Moscow and asked Stalin for his blessing to expand K-5, which was granted (Bruce, 2003). After two reorganizations, what was once K-5 became the Stasi (Bruce, 2003). The Worker’s Revolt of 17 June 1953 led the SED and the Stasi to further increase their authority (Bruce, 2003), and in 1961, due to high numbers of individuals emigrating to the FRG, the Berlin Wall was built. Dubbed the *Antifascistischer Schutzwall*—“Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart”—on the east side of the Wall (Grech, 2002, p. 121), it offers one example of the use of language by the SED to form a narrative: by equating the West with fascism and positioning the GDR and the Soviets as being in opposition, they could frame dissidents as Nazi-sympathizer enemies of the state.

The Stasi, supposedly protecting the interests of the GDR from these “hostile-negative” enemies, worked not only as an intelligence agency, but was also tasked with handling political prisoners, integrating with law enforcement, and deploying special forces units. (Michels & Wieser,

2017). The official mission was “to battle against agents, saboteurs, and diversionists [in order] to preserve the full effectiveness of [the] Constitution” (Lichter et al., 2021, p. 747). Official employees of the Stasi increased rapidly in number from 4,500 officers at the time of inception, to 20,000 in 1962, to 55,000 in 1974, to 91,000 by 1989 (Michels & Wieser, 2017; Maercker & Guski-Leinwand, 2018). In comparison, IM employment grew from 5,200 in 1950, to 92,400 in 1965, to 189,000 in 1989, with a peak of over 200,000 in 1977. Over the history of the GDR, the total number of IMs is estimated at 624,000 (Michels & Wieser, 2017; Bruce, 2003; Jedlitschka, 2012).

Between officials and IMs, the high estimate of affiliation is 1.2% from a population of approximate 16.4 million in 1989 (Maercker & Guski-Leinwand, 2018), or a ratio of 1 Stasi employee or IM for every 180 citizens of the GDR, whereas in the Soviet Union, the KGB-to-citizen ratio in 1990 was only 1 per 595. (Jedlitschka, 2012). When the Peaceful Revolution occurred in October of 1989, alongside the main protest chant of *Wir sind das Volk!*--“We are the people!”, another commonly heard demand was *Stasi raus!*--“Stasi out!” (Michels & Wieser, 2017). While the Stasi attempted to destroy the decades worth of documents and files, protesters occupied the buildings and prevented it, preserving most of it for future generations (Jedlitschka, 2012). The paper files (enough to fill 11 kilometers’ worth of shelf space), and the over 15,500 bags of shredded documents are now housed at the Stasi Records Agency (Jedlitschka, 2012; Maercker & Guski-Leinwand, 2018).

Recruitment of IMs

Collaborators were recruited by the Stasi for three main purposes: first, to gather intelligence regarding suspected dissidents; second, to encourage paranoia among the populace; and third, to cause discord within dissident networks and render them inefficient (Friehe, Pannenberg, & Wedow, 2015; Michels & Wieser, 2017). Internal Stasi instructional documents laid out guidelines for how officers were to approach potential IMs—approximately 600 theses were written by students at the Stasi Academy in Potsdam regarding best practices (Bruce, 2003; Michels & Wieser, 2017). Because of the heavy social stigma associated

with acting as an IM, the Stasi had to present compelling motivations for cooperation (Lewis, 2002). Potential recruits themselves were heavily investigated prior to initial contact; personal details, political attitudes, interests, motivations, and compromising information were gathered in order to determine how best to proceed (Michels & Wieser, 2017). IMs were chosen based on the Stasi's needs in order to infiltrate specific groups or observe specific individuals; these targets were often casual acquaintances (neighbors or coworkers) or close relationships such as family, friends, and lovers (Michels & Wieser, 2017; Lichter *et al.*, 2021). According to Espindola (2011), "[n]ot even family members were to learn about the IM's 'duty': civic bonds supersede familial ones in the context of the task assigned to the informer" (p. 102).

Still, not everyone the Stasi attempted to recruit was willing to cooperate. Richard Kruspe (who would later found the band Rammstein) was caught working as a musician and a jewelry maker without paying taxes or having skilled worker training. He recalled:

The Stasi gave me a choice: either become an IM...or go to prison. I had a week to make a decision. Naturally, I should have remained silent. But that is exactly what I didn't do, instead I spread this story around my entire social circle. With the ulterior motive that they would notice: He talks too much and is useless. After a week, they actually left me in peace (Noz.de, 2009).

Likewise, future chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, had her desired future in politics and potential negative consequences of being an IM to consider:

I am not a suitable candidate for a job whose main requirement is secrecy and discretion...because I cannot keep my mouth shut and would immediately confess the truth to friends and relatives (Espinoldo, 2011, p. 121).

This was a frequent avoidance tactic, which seemed to work well for numerous individuals (Miller, 1997). With these examples in mind, we now turn our attention to the factors that influenced individuals like Kruspe and Merkel, as well as their peers who did not share their resistance.

Regime-specific Factors

Vladimir Lenin, in his work *What is to be Done?*, explicitly opposed the trait of spontaneity, stating that it would lead to the working class falling into “subordination to bourgeois ideology” (Leask, 2012, p. 107). Indeed, emotional spontaneity was seen as a threat to the goals of Marxism-Leninism and the authority of the SED. Lingering fear of a repeat of the 1953 uprising haunted the SED with memories “of people acting in accordance with their own desires, of Freud’s aggressive drive being released uncontrollably against all that the Party stood for, of the Party itself and its members being humiliated.” (Leask, 2012, p. 109). Emotional spontaneity allowed for new interpersonal alliances, and interpersonal alliances could lead to small groups of friends pooling resources to form a grassroots political movement (Hedin, 2001).

Therefore, the SED pathologized emotion to prevent these groups from forming. “It was important to control and limit *Kreativität* [creativity] and *Lebensfreude* [enjoyment of life] precisely because beyond these was seen to lie subjectivism, which raised doubts about the validity of historical materialism, and anarchy, which was a challenge to the Party’s view on how power should be attained and retained” (Leask, 2012, p. 108).

Romantic love in particular was seen by proponents of Marxism-Leninism as a destabilizing influence to be prevented. Bolshevik theorist Alexandra Kollontai went so far as to propose a new conceptualization of romance: “The task of proletarian ideology is not to drive Eros from social life, but to rearm him according to the new social formation, and to educate sexual relationships in the spirit of the great new psychological force of comradesly solidarity” (Leask, 2012, p. 100). Marx and Engels had claimed that the traditional nuclear family was “a product of the corrupt and oppressive nature of the patriarchal bourgeois” (Port, 2011, p. 488), while Lenin believed sexuality was a distraction from the necessary total devotion to the socialist society (Port, 2011). Even love songs were viewed in the GDR as a form of political dissidence: “they stood in defiance of a system which discouraged spontaneous emotion and... made listeners aware of themselves as individuals with emotions that needed to be consciously, and yet spontaneously ex-

pressed, not ignored and/or controlled by exterior forces” (Hardwick, 1996, p. 43). Because of the Stasi’s infiltration into every aspect of East German society, trust was not given freely. If an acquaintance proved to be trustworthy, the relationship was highly valued as it allowed total honesty and open discussion—exactly what the SED leadership feared (Hardwick, 1996).

Like their forebearers in the Soviet Union, the SED and the Stasi weaponized psychiatry in an attempt to delegitimize criticism of their policies. This was primarily carried out through educational reform—“cadre policies” were established that “ensured that jobs went to party members, sympathizers, and people with proletarian backgrounds” (Leuenberger, 2007, p. 183). In other words, the intelligentsia was culled of all individuals who opposed the new regime, replacing them with those who would promote only politically approved curriculum. In the words of East German psychologist Hans-Dieter Schmidt (1980), writing for a Western audience, “The situation of psychology in the GDR must be seen in the frame of reference of various endeavors of building up a socialist society” (p. 195). Schmidt further demonstrated this new set of priorities by branding the focus on the “generalized conditioned reflex model of human behavior” as a “mistake” (Schmidt, 1980, p. 197), and arguing that allowing the private practice of psychology was forbidden “to prevent any misuse of psychological knowledge” (Schmidt, 1980, p. 196).

However, in light of the information preserved in the Stasi Archives, it becomes clear that private practice would have undermined the regime’s ability to dictate “what were to be regarded as normative behaviors and values” and label “deviance as fundamentally oppositional misbehavior requiring suppression” (Brauer, 2012, p. 62). This motive is also apparent in the use of health education films produced by the state-run *Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft* (DEFA), some of which were created “with the specific aim to warn viewers against harmful emotions” (Schnädelbach, 2020, p. 2). These films visualized the human organism as “a technical model of transmitter and receiver that situates them in a continuous feedback loop” which could cause the amplification of “bad vibes” (Schnädelbach, 2020, p. 5). Emotions were portrayed as

overstimulations of the nervous system which posed risks not only to personal, but also collective health (Schnädelbach, 2020).

According to Sell's (2017) Recalibrational Theory, anger is "triggered by indications that a target does not value the angry individual's welfare highly" (p. 13). Sell argues that the evolutionary function of negative emotion in the form of anger and aggression is to shift the target's cost/benefit assessment in the angry individual's favor. Furthermore, recent literature has begun to shift to a paradigm in which, rather than being an inherently negative phenomenon, anger can act as a catalyst for societal reorganization (Lindebaum & Gabriel, 2016). Thus, the East German government had a clear motivation for repressing strong emotions, regardless of valence.

Another attempt to prevent interpersonal bonds came directly from the Stasi, who used the existence of the IM network as a form of subtle terrorism, turning every citizen of the GDR into a "hostile element whose trust had to be earned, thus enabling this state of perpetual paranoia" (Pierce, 2009, p. 39). According to Lichter (2021):

The very knowledge that the Stasi was there and watching served to atomize society, preventing independent discussion in all but the smallest groups, [led to] the breakdown of the bonds of trust between officers and men, lawyers and clients, doctors and patients, teachers and students, pastors and their communities, friends and neighbors, family members and even lovers (p. 749).

IMs were both ubiquitous and anonymous, making the question of who to trust a universal concern. Indeed, after former residents of the GDR were able to obtain copies of their personal Stasi files from the archives, many discovered that individuals they had considered close friends had informed on them (Völker & Flap, 1997), and some particularly unlucky individuals such as activist Vera Wollenberger, discovered that their own spouses had spied on them (Lewis, 2003). Even IMs themselves were not safe, such as one informant who "deconspired"

(outed) herself as such, only to discover that the friend she had confided in was also an IM, who then dutifully reported to her assigned officer about the incident (Cooper, 1998).

Not only did this anonymity keep average citizens in line, but there is also a psychological basis that affected the IMs: "Individuals are less influenced to accept group influences when acting under conditions of personal anonymity than when the situation requires them to reveal personal identity" (Blake & Mouton, 1961, p. 14). Despite the social stigma that discouraged the act of informing, there was less social pressure from one's social circle if they remained unaware.

One particularly significant way in which individuals were aware of the presence of IMs was due to the allocation of housing in the GDR. Because accommodations were assigned by the state, loyal informants were often placed next door to suspected dissidents (Völker & Flap, 1997). The law required that each community unit maintained a Hausbuch ("housebook"), containing details about all inhabitants, including the identities of all visitors (Völker & Flap, 1997). Residents assumed that there was at least one IM present in every building and work collective (Völker & Flap, 1997), and distrust between neighbors was extremely high, "because they were in each other's vicinity almost all the time, and...learned much about each others' private lives, including politically sensitive information such as whom they invited back to their homes" (Völker & Flap, 1997, p. 248)

Another tactic used by the SED was the intentional infantilization of the populace in order to keep them complacent and dependent. According to Blake and Mouton, "[b]y controlling the amount and kind of information available as framework for orientation, [one] can be led to embrace conforming attitudes which are entirely foreign to earlier ways of thinking. Conversion can be produced by demonstrating the inadequacy of a presently accepted frame of reference and then introducing another which is more satisfactory" (p. 1-2). As the GDR was born from the remains of the Third Reich (a fact which was emphasized by the title of the national anthem, *Auferstanden aus Ruinen*, Risen from the Ruins), the socialist framework of the GDR was an entirely novel way of life,

and with the official position that the West remained fascist, the Party was able to shield its citizens from alternate points of view under the guise of benevolent paternalism. “Infantilisation,” according to Leask (2012), “is often disguised or rationalized as well meaning generosity on the part of those who consider that they know better and are therefore more suited to making decisions for those seen as below them... This applies to societies based on religious views as well as to those based on a political ideology such as Marxism-Leninism.” (p. 41).

After the Helsinki Accords were signed in 1975, greater international attention meant the Stasi had to make their methods of torture less obvious, so they began to favor gaslighting and harassment over physical violence. They called this *Zersetzung* – decomposition (Maercker & Guski-Leinwand, 2018; Michels & Wieser, 2017; Glaeser, 2003). Tactics included “anonymous telephone harassment at day and night, publication of false advertisements for used goods (so strangers would constantly ring at the door and ask for these), or a constant open surveillance of the dissident’s house, including a forced confrontation and registration of everybody who goes in and out... the orchestration of what appeared as random occurrences and unbelievable connections which made the victims doubt their own mind and destroy trust in their peers... so they became afraid of losing their mind” (Michels & Wieser, 2017, p. 51).

The goal of *Zersetzung* was not only to publicly damage the target’s public reputation, but also to erode trust in one’s self as well. One IM who was believed by his victim to be a friend was quoted as saying “When I know where I can most likely meet someone and how I can destroy him—usually in a psychological sense—then I do it if he is my enemy” (Rodden, 2005, p. 33). *Zersetzung* was so effective that the Stasi prepared 4,000-5,000 “action plans” per year against targeted individuals (Maercker & Guski-Leinwand, 2018).

The Five Primary Social Survival Motives (in an East German context)

Stevens and Fiske (1995) proposed five motivations to explain all social behavior: to belong, to understand, to be effective, to find the world benevolent, and to maintain self-esteem. In the context of the decision to become an IM, they provide insight into why some recruitment sce-

narios were particularly effective. *Belonging* is described as a state in which one is “motivated to maintain affiliations and bonds with others in order to be nurtured and protected” (Stevens and Fiske, 1995, p. 192). Baumeister (1992) suggests that the identity and the self as constructs exist primarily to foster interpersonal attachment.

One way this manifests in some individuals is the trait of authoritarianism, “an individual’s belief about the appropriate relationship that should exist between the group and its individual members,” with “emphasis on respect and unconditional obedience to in-group leaders and authorities...intolerance of and punitiveness toward persons not conforming to in-group norms and rules...[and] an emphasis on behavioral and attitudinal conformity with in-group norms and rules of conduct” (Stellmacher & Petzel, 2005, p. 247). Perceived threat to the group alone does not trigger authoritarian behaviors, but in those with the trait, these behaviors become more pronounced (Stellmacher & Petzel, 2005).

The Stasi, as part of the informer-officer relationship, put great emphasis on political education (nicknamed *Rotlichtbestrahlung*, “red light radiation therapy”) of IMs, “to help them develop a clear ‘enemy-image’ (*Feindbild*), to understand the general party line, and especially to see how the work of Stasi, including the informant’s own particular role, contributed to realizing the revolutionary intentionality of the party” (Glaeser, 2003, p. 16). Because the West and all dissidents were framed as “hostile-negative” and enemies of the state, those loyal to the Party would have viewed their very existence as enough of a threat to amplify an existing tendency towards authoritarianism.

Another motivation arising from the need to belong was that of proving one’s self to the Party (Jones, 2009; Cooper, 1998; Glaeser, 2003), especially if their personal ideal of socialism caused them to fall from its good graces. “By far the best way a subversive subject could redeem him- or herself, and have the surveillance dropped, was through a pledge to work for the Stasi...[i]f the person agreed to renounce their ‘hostile-negative’ position and collaborate, charges against them were often dropped” (Lewis, 2003, p. 393). Furthermore, citizens of the GDR were indoctrinated into the socialist mindset early on. While membership

in the state-sanctioned youth organization, the “Young Pioneers” was allegedly voluntary, practical reality dictated its necessity. “When a child applies for admission to high school...he is required to submit a testimonial from his [Young Pioneers] leader in addition to the statement from his elementary school head regarding his scholarship” (Lottich, 1963, p. 210).

Furthermore, membership in the Young Pioneers was indicated by the wearing of a blue neckerchief, the absence of which was conspicuous and brought unfavorable attention upon the offending student’s family (Droit, 2012). Not only was pressure to conform applied from above, but this visible sign of loyalty or dissent was also noticeable by fellow pupils: “Among children, greater influence is exerted on children by other children than by adults, and greater influence is exerted on younger children by older children than on older children by younger ones” (Blake & Mouton, 1961, p. 13).

The second of Stevens and Fiske’s proposed motivations, *to understand*, is based in the principle that if individuals “cannot comprehend the other members’ desires, demands, and responses, they may act in an antisocial manner and risk ejection from the group, which would threaten survival” (Stevens & Fiske, 1995, p. 196). This motivation is apparent in the accounts of IMs who cooperated with the Stasi in an attempt to gain access to privileged information. In the IM file of author Hermann Kant, his assigned officer notes that “he wanted to know more than was necessary about the workings of the MfS and he was not, of his own accord, interested in working more closely with the Stasi” (Jones, 2009, p. 196).

Another informer’s handler “supported her in her criticisms of the system and hinted that different departments of the Stasi disagreed about Gorbachev and prospects for the future” (Cooper, 1998, p. 10). Those who disagreed with the system they found themselves within may have cooperated as a means to discover cracks in its foundation.

The motivation of *effectiveness*, which “provides group members with confidence that they can competently predict and possibly control the actions of other group members” (Stevens & Fiske, 1995, p. 199), can

be seen as a desire to use the information gained from an IM's privileged position. For instance, many IMs partook in candid discussions about the state of the regime with their handlers, in the belief that they could positively affect the undesirable policies while remaining immune to the persecution that speaking publicly would bring (Lewis, 2002; Jones, 2009). One former IM even admitted that "he initially mistook the Stasi for a type of social welfare institution that takes 'wayward youths' under its wing" (Lewis, 2002, p. 131). Furthermore, some IMs provided information about loved ones in a misguided attempt to protect them from the consequences of their actions, as "informers' handlers might convince their IMs that they were helping friends stay out of danger, rather than betraying them, by informing on them" (Cooper, 1998, p. 19). One broader example not limited to IMs was women who would approach SED representatives to report their husbands' adultery—not to have them punished, but in attempts to save their marriage (Port, 2011).

In a repressive, totalitarian regime, the motive *to find the world benevolent* would have been particularly compelling, as "[b]enevolent baseline perceptions allow people to relax their vigilance except to negative information. Therefore, precious cognitive resources can be used for more important activities, such as acquiring information needed for social exchanges" (Stevens & Fiske, 1995, p. 200). There was a large discrepancy between the paternalistic benevolence the SED and the Stasi attempted to portray, and the harsh reality of their methods for retaining control, as demonstrated by accounts of political imprisonment such as that by Rodden (2005). In what were presumably attempts to decrease their cognitive dissonance, some IMs perceived their Stasi handlers as friendly figures. One female IM justified her continued collaboration by stating "I had the impression that my officer wanted to help me in my private life" (Lewis, 2011, p. 131). Another, identified as "Brigitte P." was assigned to a friend of the family, who provided emotional support to her after her husband's death (Lewis, 2011). A third, "Barbara," grew close to her handler because, in her words:

It often happened that he simply talked. He met with me and talked about his family, his wife and his children and that his brother was seriously ill with cancer. He seemed to miss a conversation partner or an advisor. I often had the impression that he was under pressure from work or was doing things that he didn't want to (Lewis, 2002, p. 129).

The last of the motivations *is to maintain self-esteem*, to “protect their feelings of self-worth” because they “mostly need to view themselves and their actions as good” (Stevens & Fiske, 1995, p. 201). There are several accounts of IMs who felt relatively trapped and helpless within the societal framework of the GDR, and working for the Stasi gave them a sense of purpose (Cooper, 1998; Glaeser, 2003). Previous research has demonstrated a positive correlation between a sense of purpose and an individual's self-esteem (Hodges, Denig, & Crowe, 2014). This is explicitly demonstrated in the case of the aforementioned IM who “deconspired” herself—she did it not as an out, but to brag about her usefulness to the Stasi (Cooper, 1998).

Sternberg's (1986) Triangle as an Explanation of the Betrayal of “Loved” Ones

Sternberg proposed love as a triangular model consisting of three aspects: intimacy, passion, and commitment. In his writing, he described eight types of love, based on varying combinations of these three aspects, and of them, half lacked the commitment component. Because of this, it may be assumed that while loving relationships did exist in the GDR, in defiance of the regime, these relationships largely lacked the characteristic of commitment and loyalty. In the case of individuals who betrayed those they felt affection for, this lack of commitment to the target likely would have led to a scenario in which the benefits gained from cooperating with the Stasi outweighed their sense of loyalty.

Laursen and Faur's (2022) Models of Susceptibility to Peer Influence

Another way to contextualize the motivations of IMs are the state (situational) and trait (personal) motives proposed by Laursen and Faur. While most of the state variables, such as conditions of uncertainty, impression management, and unmet social needs have been addressed above in the application of Stevens and Fiske's model, the trait variables warrant further exploration. The first of these is a conformity disposition, in which "[h]igh self-monitoring individuals attend to social cues about inferred normative behaviors, then eventually adopt those behaviors" (Laursen & Faur, 2022, p 10-11). According to Blake and Moulton (1961), men are more resistant to social pressures than women. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that "[b]y comparison with subjects classified as neurotic, those described as normal show more conforming tendencies in the pressure situation" (Laursen & Faur, 2022, p. 19). They are referring to the Western definition of neurosis (as opposed to the Marxist), and at first, this seems counterintuitive, but it may be that a higher baseline level of anxiety acts as an "inoculation" of sorts against the social effects of fear, or perhaps there may be a connection between neurosis and low self-monitoring.

Another trait variable concerns resource acquisition strategies; an "attempt to gain resources by appeasing dominant others, ingratiating themselves into the company of the powerful by acquiescing to demands" (Laursen & Faur, 2022, p. 12). Within the Marxist-Leninist structure of the GDR, informal networks often formed between individuals for the purpose of obtaining goods and services not readily available by conventional means, due to the induced "economy of shortage" (Völker & Flap, 1997, p. 246). There are several examples in the literature of those who specifically exploited their relationship with the Stasi for resources, such as the scientist who "ceased to collaborate with Stasi after Stasi had failed to obtain important chemicals for his research" (Glaeser, 2003, p. 14). This even occurred outside of the GDR; an informer for the Hungarian equivalent of the Stasi worked as an informant in Germany and Austria for a decade to learn the language and build social networks, which he then used to defect (Slachta, 2017).

Vulnerabilities and liabilities were often exploited by the Stasi to coerce potential recruits. According to Laursen and Faur, “[t]hose who are physically, emotionally or intellectually frail may fear harm and humiliation that can accompany resistance to influence attempts” (pp. 12-13). Examples of these include threats of imprisonment or loss of child custody (Lewis, 2011), loss of employment, revelation of IM status to acquaintances (Cooper, 1998), further reduction of already restricted travel (Stein, 2016), or revocation of housing (Leask, 2012). The Stasi also took advantage of personal or familial difficulties, coaxing cooperation under the guise of helping to alleviate such issues (Cooper, 1998). However, there is historical evidence to suggest that refusal to cooperate with the Stasi rarely resulted in the threats made being carried out (Miller, 1997; Lewis, 2002).

One last relevant trait variable consists of popularity and social goals. According to Laursen and Faur, “upward strivers may be susceptible to influence...those who want to be popular and those who are oriented toward attaining greater popularity should demonstrate greater conformity than those who do not share similar goals” (p. 13). As stated previously, informing for the Stasi put one in the agency’s good graces, which as has been demonstrated, was necessary for a comfortable life in the GDR. Furthermore, female informers were often guided by the desire for gender equality (Lewis, 2002, p. 132).

Relevant Neurobiological Concepts

There is a possibility that variations in levels of the neuropeptide oxytocin could influence interpersonal loyalty, as it “has been shown to function as a central regulator in social attachment and in related prosocial behaviors” (Heinrichs *et al.*, 2003, p. 1390), and studies have demonstrated “a statistically significant positive effect of [oxytocin] on interpersonal trust ($p = 0.038$, one-tailed)” (Merolla *et al.*, 2013, p. 762). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that East German refugees demonstrated significantly decreased levels across a thyroid panel when compared to controls, so much so that 62% of patients were classified as hypothyroid, despite showing no symptomatic evidence of hypothyroidism (Bauer *et al.*, 1993). This same study observed that

while this decrease occurred in both former political prisoners and non-incarcerated GDR refugees, there was no significant difference between the groups, suggesting that merely living in constant fear of the Stasi's presence may have been just as psychologically damaging as politically-motivated imprisonment (Bauer *et al.*, 1993), and this influence on the endocrine system may have had diverse impacts on individuals. From an anatomical perspective, one recent study in early adolescents demonstrated higher functional connectivity between the premotor and prefrontal cortices in subjects who demonstrated more behavioral resistance to peer influence (Grosbras *et al.*, 2007). Another, also in adolescents, found that neural activity in the “social pain network” (dorsal and subgenual anterior cingulate cortex and anterior insular cortex) and dorsomedial prefrontal cortex during experiences of social exclusion correlated with peer-influenced risk-taking (Falk *et al.*, 2014), suggesting a heightened adverse response to social rejection. While neurobiological variations between those who became IMs and those who refused would make for a compelling study, however, further investigation is outside the scope of this thesis.

Personal and Societal Impacts

At an individual level, the literature is consistent in the emphasis on the development of PTSD and phobias in former East Germans, which often persisted even after *die Wende*—“the turn-around” leading to the reunification of Germany. Pierce (2019) summarizes this by noting “there were real, long-term mental health consequences similar to post-traumatic stress syndrome to having been a Stasi target...In the GDR, there was a subtle, psychologically erosive effect that occurred over time through interference with people’s life choices.” (p. 35). Studies examining disorders and symptoms in victims of the Stasi reported exhaustion, gastrointestinal complaints, musculoskeletal complaints, and cardiovascular complaints in former political prisoners (Weißflog *et al.*, 2012); PTSD in 30.1% of formerly imprisoned subjects (at the time of the study), lifetime PTSD (59.6%), specific phobia (including claustrophobia, 22.3%), recollections of trauma (62%), stressful dreams/nightmares (58%), hypervigilance (56%), avoidance of reminders of trauma

(17%), psychogenic amnesia (17%), and diminished interest in activities (16%) in former political prisoners (Maercker & Schutzwohl, 1997); sleep disturbances (83%), nervousness (63%), headaches (42%), sadness (38%), aggressiveness (30%), repeated crying (30%), exhaustion (26%), perspiration (24%), agoraphobia (19%), loss of appetite (18%), poor concentration (17%), and backache (17%), inner restlessness (92%), irritability (89%), a tendency to become exhausted quickly (85%), brooding (83%), insomnia (83%), a feeling of weakness (67%), heavy perspiration (63%), headaches (58%), trembling (54%), an excessive need of sleep (52%), and weight loss (50%) in a population of both imprisoned and non-imprisoned refugees. (Bauer *et al.*, 1993).

However, the intrusion of the Stasi into every aspect of life in the GDR has also had a lasting influence at the societal level. Previous studies have demonstrated that East Germans demonstrate less solidarity and honesty than West Germans (Friehe, Pannenberg, & Wedow, 2015), presumably conditioned thusly by the risks that both traits exposed one to in the GDR. Furthermore, there is a lasting intergenerational trauma in the families of Stasi victims, as members were either directly harmed through guilt by association, or traumatized by the experience of watching their loved ones suffer (Leask, 2012).

While the SED, through its propaganda, portrayed communism as the natural enemy of the GDR's Nazi predecessors, history has shown that it was merely their far-left equivalent. Sadly, despite the lessons to be learned from the East German "experiment," there are still numerous contemporary variations, such as the abuse of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib (overseen by the United States), the incarceration of Russian citizens protesting against the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, or the physical violence and executions perpetrated against Iranian citizens by the Guidance Patrol. One notable difficulty in studying the Stasi from a psychological perspective is that the majority of literature approaches the subject from within a sociological or historical paradigm, and as such, there is a dearth of quantitative literature, an oversight which can hopefully be corrected while the generations who lived under the regime are still alive to tell their stories.

When subjecting historical events to post-hoc analysis, the issue of causality arises. While Fricke, Pannenberg, & Wedow regard the division of the GDR and the FRG as an experiment, it cannot truly be considered such. The GDR was not truly isolated despite the efforts of the regime—Western influences still existed, whether through individuals who had taken trips outside the GDR, or by means such as radio broadcasts that, unlike people, could not be stopped by the Berlin Wall. Many East Germans had some inkling of the quality of life in the West, so social behavior could not be entirely blamed on ignorance of alternatives. Another difficulty arises with the existence of psychological intervention. With the passage of time, during which the traumatized have had access to therapy and pharmacological intervention, we no longer have access to an accurate assessment of their neurobiological state. The moment has passed in which we can directly study the physiological and biochemical effects specific to the GDR regime.

Most of the sociological and psychological literature concerning the GDR is based on case studies and interviews, which are invaluable from a living history perspective, but are subject to biases and the fading of memories over time, the latter of which will only become more exacerbated the further in the past *die Wende* becomes. Perhaps future studies might involve Quantitative Trait Loci studies of former GDR citizens who were approached by the Stasi and either cooperated or declined, to examine the possibility of genetic predisposition for personality traits that cause a tendency towards cooperation with authority, even when the authority is disliked. Neurological studies could also be performed on the children of former GDR and FRG citizens, to determine whether the stress of living under a totalitarian regime and the threat of political persecution has cross-generational epigenetic consequences. Studies of a more sociological nature could even explore what similarities and differences exist between living under far-right (fascist) and far-left (communist) regimes.

Conclusion

The German Democratic Republic, despite the *Ostalgie* with which it is regarded by some former citizens, and the relative lack of academic research about the society, nevertheless remains one of the definitive examples of a totalitarian regime, and a haunting case study of how governments are capable of using social psychology against their citizens in an attempt to maintain absolute authority. Many residents of the GDR experienced three separate German societies over the course of their lives, and therefore their history reflects not only the dangers of totalitarianism, but the instability created by multiple regime changes. With countries in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Asia, and even the Celtic nations of the United Kingdom pushing for independence or revolution, psychological insight is necessary for peaceful transition and just governments to prevail. Hopefully, the political, psychological, and sociological lessons to be learned from East Germany, which rose from the ruins of the Third Reich through the influence of the Soviet Union, will one day be regarded with the same gravity as its predecessors.

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