

Ten Terrifying Facts About East Germany's Stasi Surveillance

To maintain power for 40 years while their people starved and plotted to escape, the Communist Party had to get very good at controlling people and undermining anti-state activists. But outright street violence and assassinations weren't good for the Party image, so the Ministry for State Security got creative. Better known as the Stasi (the German acronym), these secret police were the "*Schild und Schwert der Partei*" (Shield and Sword of the Party.) Their sole function was to keep the Communist Party in power. They didn't care how.

1) They Were Gaslighting before It Was a Thing

The Stasi were prolific gaslighters. In the 1950s, repression was brutal, physical torture. Early in the 1970s, eager to be accepted on the international stage, the East German Secret Police had to get more subtle. The aim of [*Zersetzung*](#) (a repurposed military term meaning disintegration or corrosion) was to "switch off" any activist individuals and groups who might threaten the Party. Police collected medical, school, and police records, interviews with neighbors and relatives, and any other evidence they could get and would then customize a direct hit on an individual's mental health.

If someone looked like he might challenge the Communist Party's legitimacy or control, the Stasi systematically destroyed his life. They used blackmail, social shame, threats, and torture. Careers, reputations, relationships, and lives were exploded to destabilize and delegitimize a critic. Some forms of harassment were almost comical: agents spread

rumors about their targets, flooded their mailboxes with pornography, moved things around in their apartments, or deflated their bicycle tires day after day. Others were life-altering: Individuals labeled as subversives were banned from higher education, forced into unemployment, and forcibly committed to asylums. Many suffered long-term [psychological trauma](#), loss of earnings, and intense social shame as a result of Stasi lies.

2) They Were (Almost) Everywhere

The Stasi had 91,000 employees at its peak – roughly one in every 30 residents was a Stasi agent. More than one in three East Germans (5.6 million) was under suspicion or surveillance, with an open Stasi file. Another half million were feeding the Stasi information. This level of surveillance and infiltration caused East Germans to live in terror – you really never knew if you could trust anyone – though most had no idea of the scope of these activities until after the Berlin Wall fell.

3) They Kept a Crazy Amount of (Meticulous) Records

Stasi files laid out together would cover about 69 square miles. Recording detailed personal information on a third of the populace required a tremendous amount of paper. More pages of printed text were generated by the Stasi than by all German authors from the Middle Ages to WWII. Thousands of citizens were targeted as anti-government “trouble makers,” their homes were searched, phones and cars – if they were lucky enough to have either – were bugged, their letters opened and copied, and their movements secretly filmed or photographed. Every document went into a personal Stasi file. So far, hundreds of millions of files, 39 million index cards, 1.75 million photographs, 2,800 reels of film, and 28,400

audio recordings have been recovered from Stasi archives. Millions more were shredded before they could be made public.



4) Their Super-Secret Archives Are Now Public – Sort of

In 1992, the secret files the Stasi had kept on millions of East Germans were made available for review. Citizens can request to see their personal files, which are housed by the [Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Archives](#) on 63 miles of dedicated shelving. Sixteen thousand sacks of shredded documents still await reassembly. The agency tasked with maintaining them employed at least [79 former Stasi members](#) as late as 2007, according to Wikileaks. Three million individuals have applied to see their records, with decidedly mixed results. Many former subjects of Stasi investigation or surveillance found out only from these files – 20 years later – that their parents, children, spouses, or lifelong friends had been informing against them.



5) They Stirred up Trouble in the Middle East

Stasi officers were highly influential in the Middle East, recruiting and training at least 1,000 military officers from Iraq, Libya, Syria, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The [Stasi taught](#) these foreigner agents

how to hijack planes and take hostages. Where the Stasi didn't succeed in placing its own trainees, it often sought blackmail material that could bend the will of foreign agents: Senior Stasi officers served as gardeners and groundskeepers in valuable embassies, listening in for juicy details. A complex web of [West German infiltrators](#) and enemy collaborators was discovered only years later.

6) They Paid Reparations to Their Victims – Kind Of

Of the 10,000 people who can definitively prove they were targeted by *Zersetzung*, some 5,000 had [lasting psychological damage](#) inflicted by their own government. Thousands more lost careers and marriages. Some were jailed or had their children kidnapped by the state. These victims, now officially recognized, were supposed to receive modest compensation. The promised reparations – still only half of what loyal Communists still receive in pensions – have been [difficult to obtain](#).

7) The Stasi Operated Its Own Prison

[Hohenschönhausen](#). Over 900 former inmates have given testimony about the horror that happened there, but while the Stasi were active, the facility was top secret. The area didn't officially exist and was marked with a blank space on city maps. In reality, most of the country operated as an open-air prison, as few people were allowed to leave the country on exit visas. The Stasi [told the people](#),

doctors, engineers, and skilled workers were induced by refined methods unworthy of the dignity of man to give up their secure existence in the GDR [German Democratic Republic, aka East Germany] and work in West Germany or West

Berlin.

For their own “security,” East German citizens were not allowed to leave the East German state. Those who tried were often jailed or killed.

8) Their Propaganda Was Weaponized – Sometimes Literally

Public schools in East Germany were training grounds for police state compliance. Young children cut and colored paper dolls with [gas masks and AK-47s](#). Hitler Youth-style groups were [established for school children](#). In the absence of Twitter and text messages, Stasi officers launched “metal coconuts” or “information rockets” [full of flyers](#) into the countryside. The people were told the Berlin Wall was a protective barrier against “[a West German separatist state](#)” bent on sabotaging their socialist state. Psychological operations were used to glorify the East German socialist state and smear the immoral, pleasure-seeking, capitalist West.

9) The Stasi Banned Porn – Then Filmed Their Own

Erotica – whether printed or filmed – was banned in East Germany, and was pointed to as evidence of the West’s decadence and depravity. But the Stasi filmed its own series of pornographic films, featuring civilian female employees dressed as soldiers. In one film, a topless female recruit in a helmet leaps to attention at the command, “Breasts Out!” The Communist Party elite and military officers turned out for the secret premieres of 12 films. Their attendance was logged for blackmail purposes. The [official Department of Pornography](#) employed 160 people and 12 amateur enthusiasts between 1982

and 1989.

10) The Nazis Wrote the Stasi Playbook

Psychological policing of Germany's population – to root out dissenting voices and prevent people from challenging the government – had been the norm under the Gestapo, Nazi Germany's intelligence-gathering police. Nazis paved the way by using citizens as [informers or denouncers](#).

In that kind of tattler culture, reporting your neighbors for minor wrongdoing might keep your own family safe. The secret police had so much personal information about each citizen and so much influence over institutions (whether you could get into college, get a job, buy a car) their power was almost absolute – and absolutely unaccountable. They didn't have to arrest you – they could socially paralyze you.

(Large-scale data collection by today's National Security Administration and Homeland Security follows the same pattern, according to well-known whistleblowers [Edward Snowden](#) and [Daniel Ellsberg](#). The "[See something? Say something](#)" culture of citizen informers, the collection of personal info without warrants, and the assumption of guilt all feel eerily familiar.)

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This article was originally published on FEE.org. Read the [original article](#).

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