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The Spies are Among Us: Secret Police in Post-Reunification Film

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Abstract

This study focuses on the representation of secret police systems- the Gestapo in Nazi Germany and the Stasi in the German Democratic Republic- in post-reunification German language films. During the 1990s, the Stasi became one of the most prominent symbols of East German communism and oppression; the Gestapo, through emerging scholarship, became a subject of interest within the Nazi repression system. Perceptions of these systems have been affected not only by developing research but popular media. Films have a particular impact on public memory; their portrayal of the GDR and the Nazi State color the views held by those who never experienced the regimes and even those who had. This project explores the particular aspects of the Stasi and Gestapo seen in film and works to disentangle fact from fiction. Analysis of Stasi documents reveal an obsession with the use of informants; this obsession has been passed on to film, where informants are frequently the main contact between the Stasi and those they are observing. In the case of the Gestapo, recent research reveals that the apparatus relied heavily on denunciations from the general public, a fact that is often ignored or downplayed by films. More often than not, the conflicts portrayed are between the protagonist and a singular officer. The discrepancy between media portrayals of these systems reflects the warped memories developed in the years since their collapse and the ongoing struggle to define German identities in a reunified country.

Keywords: German Reunification, Secret Police, Film, Public Memory

Introduction

In recent decades, the question of Germany's representations of its own past have once again surfaced. The 1980s and 1990s brought significant changes to Germany: fights between historians about how the Holocaust fits into German history, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the reunification of the country all caused major political and cultural shifts. These shifts also affected the public perception of Germany and its past, as new information about Nazi Germany and new insights about East Germany, the DDR, and West Germany, the BRD, were brought to light. Research conducted in the 1990s on the Gestapo, the secret police of Nazi Germany, brought its relationship to the citizens of Germany to the forefront of historical debate. With the reunification of Germany in 1990, the files of the Stasi, the secret police of the DDR, were collected in an archive and opened to researchers and the public. With this shift in studies of Nazi Germany and the new ability to study the Stasi, both police forces became prominent subjects of research and public discussion in reunified Germany.

Public interest often displays itself in the form of films. After 1990, films about Nazi Germany increasingly featured members of the Gestapo working against protagonists resisting the regime. New films about the Stasi, previously a topic that was not discussed in media in the DDR, informed West Germans of the police on the other side of the Wall and reminded East Germans of their experiences and those of their neighbors (Gerhards 574). These films give people a chance to reflect; through the lens of a camera, individuals are able to place their personal experiences in context of the world created onscreen.

The importance of films as historical artifacts is laid out by film historian and theorist Anton Kaes, who is particularly known for his work on German film. He states that,

> Narrative fictions in film (or any other medium) do not exist in a vacuum but are part of a social and economic dynamic; they do not simply mirror society, they comment on it. In their own way, fictions intervene in on-going debates and often give shape to dominant discourses; they negotiate collective fears, hopes, and hidden anxieties; and they supply in their make-believe worlds precisely what cannot be had or said in reality (51).

As these films are shaped by public attitudes and culture, so is culture shaped by films. Films, especially fictional ones, grant us the ability to explore our own worlds as they are and could be. They allow us a place to put our emotions and experiences alongside other people's, to connect with a community, and to learn more about ourselves and our societies. Kaes continues to ask,

> Is film history, then, a history of collective wishes and repressed desires; a history of emotions, anxieties, vicarious experiences, and illusions; a history, maybe, of what did not happen but was felt, experienced, remembered, enjoyed, suffered? (55).

In exploring the worlds of films, there are pieces of history that never make it to screen and others that are exaggerated and repeated. These questions inform the trajectory of this project, while the disentanglement of fact and fiction is its purpose.

To answer these questions, I analyzed twenty German-language films produced in Germany after reunification in 1990. The majority of films were chosen through the International Movie Database (IMDb), which I used for a number of reasons, the most prominent being access. IMDb tends to have categorized more well-known films that would be easier to access and more likely to have been played in theaters. IMDb additionally uses keywords to categorize their films. The films included in this project were all ones labeled "Gestapo" or "Stasi" by IMDb's keyword function. Some additional films were chosen when they were referenced in articles discussing film. IMDb is not an academic organization, but rather an online catalog of films, updated by users. Since information on the site is reliant on users, it is not a complete database of all films, and inaccuracies are bound to occur. However, this very nature also implies an enhanced link between the site and the public, suggesting that titles which are on the database have been seen by more

people or resonated strongly with their audience, prompting them to submit the information. The majority of the films are fictional dramas, though three documentaries were also included in this analysis.

Of particular interest are the ways in which public cooperation did exist in Nazi Germany and the DDR and how that cooperation is then shown (or not shown) in film. I will argue that the connections between the Gestapo, the Stasi, and the public were of vital importance to the regimes they supported. Without the maintenance of the ties between these organizations and the public, they would have been unable to function. However, this vital piece of their functioning is not well translated into film. Cooperation with the Gestapo in film is rare. Though it is more commonly depicted in films about the Stasi, collaboration with the police is rarely agreed to by choice. In a break from reality, the public does not become complicit in these films; the thousands of denunciations and miles of informant reports are nowhere to be seen onscreen. These narratives reveal different layers of acceptance and rejection of the role of the average citizen in the oppressive systems of Nazi Germany and the DDR. Kaes writes that, "As a form of communal self-reflection, films tell us stories about ourselves." (50) The specific scenes, images, and characters that make it to screens are a reflection of us as we wish to be and history as we wanted it. In these films, that desired history is one of resistance against an oppressive and consuming state, not complicity.

The Gestapo

The Gestapo, the secret police of Nazi Germany, were tasked with the investigation of so-called political crimes and the protection of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Their efforts were focused on the eradication of leftist opposition parties, upholding the virtue of the state by punishing gossip and defeatism, and the control of relationships between Germany Aryans and those considered other,

such as Jews and Poles. The relatively small size of the Gestapo meant that it became heavily reliant on the public for its information. The most prominent connection between the Gestapo and the public was denunciations. Historian Robert Gellately estimates that approximately a third of Gestapo cases began with a denunciation from a member of the public (136). These were statements given to the Gestapo, whether in writing or in person, about individuals committing political crimes. Members of the public were able to walk to their local police or Gestapo station and give statements freely, generally receiving no compensation. Some denouncers would be asked to return throughout the investigation as witnesses, depending on the crime. Many of the accusations were determined by the Gestapo to be false. However, the vast majority of tips sent in by the public, including verbal and even anonymous tips, sparked an investigation by the Gestapo (Gellately 139). With the public feeding them information, the Gestapo had the ability to monitor much of the German population.

It is hard to determine exactly what a denouncer's motivations were, though the Gestapo did at times throw out cases when there were obvious biases or incentives on the part of the denouncer. Many denunciations, according to Gellately's work, stemmed from economic incentives or interpersonal disputes. A denunciation could get rid of an obnoxious neighbor, a manager preventing promotion, or an abusive husband (Gellately 148). It gave a particular power to the average person against those with whom they quarreled and disagreed with. Some cases may have been passed through the local Nazi Party before reaching the Gestapo. However, alongside the loss of documents from bombings and deliberate destruction, the phrasing of many reports, which include extremely vague references to where information comes from, renders it nearly impossible to determine the exact number of cases brought to the Gestapo's attention by the general public.

The varying motives of denouncers created significant difficulties for the Gestapo. Denouncers were not required to prove their loyalty to Nazism or the Nazi Party and were reacting to extremely vague and constantly shifting legal codes. As such, many denouncers brought petty problems before the Gestapo. Despite its reminders to the contrary, often the Gestapo was in the position of being a "conflict resolution agency" that mediated disputes between opposing parties (Joshi 60). Additionally, people were often denounced for actions that were not actually crimes by the legal code (Gellately 177). The Gestapo's near unlimited discretion in punishing offenders gave them the ability to decide that these actions actually were crimes and the accused were punished as such. Often, the punished actions retroactively became crimes when the legal code was updated.

Even under the vague laws of the Nazi State, denouncers sometimes stretched to find criminal acts to pin on their enemies and neighbors. This was especially true within the family, where women were more likely to file denunciations with the Gestapo. They were also more likely to files divorces; frequently, criminal misbehavior tipped the divorce rulings in favor of the wife (Joshi 64). When they did denounce, they often highlighted the moral deviancy of their partners, whether it be physical abuse, alcoholism, chronic unemployment, or a failure to properly care for the family (Joshi 50). None of this was technically illegal, though it could place a person under the category of "asocial" and lead them to be deported to a concentration camp. However, the women denouncing twisted their narratives to pin a crime on their husbands, often related to defeatism or leftist leanings, that would force the involvement of the Gestapo. Through denunciation, the private was mixed with the political, leading to legal punishment for personal disputes.

For the first few years of the Gestapo's existence, denunciations focused primarily on Jews. After the Nuremberg Laws were passed in 1935, infractions of state regulated interactions with

Jews were reported frequently to the police. Personal motives for denouncing Jews ranged from coveting the richer apartments and houses of neighboring Jews, general envy for their wealth that was furthered by stereotypes of greed and stinginess, and cleansing one's neighborhood of racial impurity (Joshi 99, 106, 109). Meeting with the Gestapo was in of itself a harrowing experience, but harassment was compounded by the Gestapo taking items from Jewish persons' homes when coming to arrest them (Joshi 129). The Gestapo also began to employ informants to catch Jews hiding others, committing minor crimes, or refusing to wear identification. With paid Jewish informants being active in Jewish communities, particularly in Berlin, Jews felt increasingly unsafe in Germany and began to emigrate to other places.

The emigration of Jews and the invasion of Poland brought different priorities to the forefront. The Gestapo were expected to maintain order amongst the German populations in occupied territories as well, stretching their already limited personnel thin. Over the course of the war, demand for police officers grew, leading the Gestapo to hire from Nazi organizations like the *Schutzstaffel*, or SS. This need for a larger police force brought in more individuals that had no police experience, causing standards of training and discipline to fall (Browder 23). Reliance on the general population for information increased. It was expected that German citizens report suspicious activities of others and in occupied territories, meaning that denunciations were of even greater significance (Grabowski 23). The Gestapo saw itself as protecting the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or racial community, of the Nazi State. Segregation was enforced to keep foreign workers, most often Poles, separate from ethnic Germans. Race defilement was defined by any form of contact between Aryans and racial others, but particular emphasis was placed on the sexual relations of Aryans with other groups (Gellately 223). As the war dragged on, this kind of "sexual deviancy" became one of the most prominent topics of Gestapo cases.

While the Gestapo did target political groups, many of the so-called political crimes investigated related to personal relations, personal opinions, and gossip. The nature of these crimes made them generally difficult to detect and investigate, especially with the low ratio of officers to civilians. As such, the organization became reliant on the population for the detection of such crimes, and thousands of cases were opened on the basis of denunciations. There was no compensation offered for these denunciations, and the state did not punish those who brought in false accounts. Rather, a myriad of personal motives brought thousands of ordinary Germans to the Gestapo's doors, and those voices condemned their neighbors, friends, coworkers, and even family. Without these voices, the Gestapo would have been unable to function.

The Stasi

With the end of the war and the division of Germany, the Stasi was installed as the secret police of East Germany, tasked with protecting the state from the West, preventing escapes and rebellions, and protecting the Socialist Party of Germany. For its operations, the Stasi recruited thousands of individuals as informants. These informants would provide information on individuals, groups, or the general population, depending on the task at hand. The importance of informants was stressed by Erich Mielke, head of the organization from 1957 to 1989. Feelings of duty, responsibility, and love for Socialism were supposed to be taught to informants by their controlling officers. Mielke expressed his interest in having the installation of "the love of informant work" in every person working informally with the Stasi (Ring 118).[1] Each officer approached their informants in different ways, and every informant required different incentives to continue work. Often, these incentives were positive. The Stasi offered gifts, access to Western goods, political favors, legal favors, job offers, school placements, cash, and anything else an

[1] "*Liebe zur IM [inoffizielle Mitarbeiter] Arbeit.*" translation mine.

informant would have interest in (Bruce 99). Some informants were close with their officers, using the informal *du* to address them (Costabile-Heming 141). For others, the financial and monetary support from the Stasi was vital to their lifestyles. Reporting for some informants "came to fulfil on some level a deep-seated human need- whether perhaps to be important, to have power, or even for some psychological reassurance" (Lewis 35).

There were also negative consequences involved with informant work. Officers felt no qualms threatening, blackmailing, coercing, harassing, and imprisoning informants when the stick was necessary rather than the carrot. Some informants found their job developed into a horrifying task that became deeply upsetting to them. After reunification, authors compared the act of collaboration as a moral and physical collapse, an addiction, or a failure to maintain self-control (Ring 124). Informants were sometimes struck with incredible paranoia; one informant became convinced his wife and friends were all Stasi and was subsequently dismissed "because he was 'hallucinating' about the Stasi being everywhere" (Bruce 101). Informants could also be handled differently over time, with the Stasi mixing their strategies to maintain compliance. For each individual, their contact with the Stasi was personalized to attain maximum obedience.

Informants were almost always recruited by the Stasi themselves. At times, a Stasi officer requested names of potential candidates from figures of authority, such as teachers or managers. Sometimes officers came into schools and factories themselves to establish contact before deciding to hire a person as an informant, scenes which are burned into the public memory in films such as *Sonnenallee*. Usually, informants were sought out for specific surveillance jobs, whether they be individuals or certain sectors of society (Bruce 112). There was no particular gender bias in those who became informants. The use of blackmail and other forms of coercion on informants is a prominent piece of the post-reunification image of the Stasi, and it is one that is often gendered.

Women are often seen as more susceptible to coercion and less willing to be “heroic” than men. As the Stasi archives opened, tales of wives betraying their husbands to the Stasi scandalized the public and immortalized the image of the weak-willed woman breaking under the pressure. While these images prevail, the Stasi did not target women as informants specifically, and informants were often male simply due to their job positions (Cooper 6). However, once an informant was recruited, establishing trust and a working relationship was a difficult task. As such, the Stasi was often reluctant to release informants from service, even when their usefulness had ended (Bruce 94). This desire to hold on to informants meant that massive swaths of society in the DDR were monitored by the Stasi. As a former officer put it, “there was nothing we weren’t interested in” (Bruce 55).

The length of time the Stasi kept people under surveillance and their reluctance to release informants from employment, even when they no longer served a clear purpose, led the Stasi to develop a near blanket surveillance of DDR society. Over the course of its existence, more than 250,000 officers and 600,000 informants were employed by the apparatus (Schafer 23). At the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, there were 91,000 full-time employees and 181,000 informants (Bruce 2). This created a very high ratio of police to citizens, one that, as far as is known, was higher than any other country’s. This ratio was enforced by the Socialist Party, which often equated more informants with greater security. This frustrated many officers, who found themselves juggling meetings with more and more informants, even when they did not have new information to offer. As one former officer complained, “he was joining an organization that was more interested in fueling its own bureaucracy than in undertaking concrete tasks to safeguard the GDR against legitimate threats” (Bruce 57). Bogged down by increasing amounts of trivial information and tedious work, the functions of the Stasi began to grind to a halt. When the state eventually collapsed

and the Stasi files opened to the public, the sheer number of officers and informants shocked and horrified the public. Suddenly, it seemed that every friend and coworker could have been an informant, and millions of Germans applied to see their own files. The discovery of the extent of Stasi infiltration and the network of informants solidified the understanding that without the thousands of people who worked with the organization, both willingly and unwillingly, the level of Stasi surveillance could not have been maintained.

Representation in Films

After the reunification of Germany, scholars turned their eyes on the newly opened Stasi archives and the new information regarding the Gestapo. Stasi files in particular caused significant stirs in the media, as famous persons and scandalous cases were exposed. Within reunified Germany, interest turned towards the workings of these secret police apparatuses, and films about the Gestapo and the Stasi began to reach theaters. This project focuses on twenty of those post-reunification films, discussing ten regarding the Gestapo and ten regarding the Stasi. Both of these organizations were heavily reliant on the involvement and cooperation of members of the public, a fact that is rarely conveyed on screen. This break between reality and fiction buries the participation of ordinary Germans in these oppressive systems. A list of films is included below.

Gestapo Films	Year	Director	Stasi Films	Year	Director
Aimée & Jaguar	1999	Max Färberböck	*Sonnenallee*	1999	Leander Haußmann
Rosenstraße	2003	Margarethe von Trotta	*Die Stille nach dem Schuss*	2000	Volker Schlöndorff
Sophie Scholl	2005	Marc Rothemund	*Der Stich des Skorpion*	2004	Stephan Wagner
Der neunte Tag	2005	Volker Schlöndorff	*Der Tunnel*	2005	Roland Suso Richter
Die Fälscher	2007	Stefan Ruzowitzky	*Das Leben der Anderen*	2006	Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck
Mein Führer	2007	Dani Levy	*An die Grenze*	2007	Urs Egger
Human Failure	2008	Michael Verhoeven	*Die Wahrheit über die Stasi*	2008	Alexander Zahn
Ein blinder Held	2015	Kai Christiansen	*Gesicht zur Wand*	2009	Stefan Weinert
Elser	2015	Oliver Hirschbiegel	*Liebe Mauer*	2009	Peter Timm
Der Trafikant	2018	Nikolaus Leytner	*Anderson*	2014	Annekatrin Hendel

The majority of ten films surveyed in this project which focus on the Gestapo were set during World War II, with one exception. *Der Trafikant*, set in the months leading up to the Anschluss of Austria in 1938, is the only film to not be set during wartime. For filmmakers, the war years may simply be a more interesting time to explore. Consequences for potential protagonists increase massively during the war and especially after the formalization of the concentration and extermination camp system in 1941. Perhaps more information is documented about peoples' lives during the war years, providing more material for historical films to be based on. With the potential for drama and the material available, the war years are attractive to filmmakers looking to director something about the Gestapo. However, there are other potential reasons for the attraction to the period. Denunciations from the public dropped as the war continued, and much of the activity of the Gestapo was focused in German-occupied areas like Poland. As such, many of these stories from history do not feature "regular" members of the public giving information to the Gestapo.

While it is unclear exactly what the public and filmmakers know about the Gestapo and the volume of denunciations, it is easy to argue that war, in any case, can be a significant enough stressor to cause moral change. Within the context of war, the participation of the public can be attributed to the desire for survival and safety. Filmmakers use the common understanding that war is a significant stressor to reduce the culpability of those who do report to the Gestapo. The instances where members of the public are involved are generally short scenes that are not dwelt on as moral quandaries, but rather serve to push the story along. Even scenes of betrayal, such as in *Ein blinder Held* were the protagonists are reported to the police by a Jewish friend, are brushed aside quickly, and the betrayers given excuses by those they work against. By setting their films during the war and avoiding stories involving denunciations, filmmakers are able to gloss over the

participation of the German public in persecution. Despite the thousands of denunciations received by the real Gestapo, only three of the films surveyed had a member of the public give information to the organization: *Der Trafikant, Ein blinder Held,* and *Sophie Scholl*. *Der Trafikant* was the only film to have an instance of denunciation. Notably, *Der Trafikant* is directed by a native Austrian, Nikolaus Leytner, and was coproduced by Epo-Films, an Austrian company, and Tobis and Glory Films, two Germany companies. This multi-national nature may explain the different perspective taken by the film.

The lack of portrayals of public involvement with the Gestapo suggests a desire to separate from the actions of ordinary Germans during the Nazi Regime. This avoidance leaves gaps in the modern understanding of Nazi Germany, but ultimately comforts the audience. Rather than being confronted with the actions of ordinary citizens like their families and themselves, audiences can be assured that persecution came only from the state. Being absolved of guilt, the audience can then enjoy the film as a piece of historical entertainment. By confining their films to the war years and avoiding the use of denunciations and other forms of public participation, filmmakers place all of the blame on the Gestapo themselves rather than the average person. Considering how Nazi Germany and the Gestapo remain a significant topic of debate and consternation in Germany, filmmakers must be careful in what they chose to portray and how they portray it.

Another avenue through which filmmakers create distance between the audience and the events of the film is the Gestapo officers themselves. The films surveyed often have one Gestapo officer as the prime antagonist who is either chasing down the protagonist or attempting to convince them of something, whether to confess or to work for them. Several of the Gestapo portrayed are shown to be careerists who joined the organization for its pay and benefits rather than an actual belief in Nazi ideology. They are open to bribes and gifts in exchange for ignoring

violations of the law; however, they also tend to sexually harass women, use excessive force, and be overall callous and disinterested in the lives of others. Even if they are not strict Nazis, the films make it clear that they are irredeemable in other ways. Through scenes of careerism and callousness, Gestapo officers are shown to not be standard police officers or ordinary people. They are depicted as morally lacking and far from the average citizen.

Other films depict their Gestapo officers as being deeply involved with Nazi ideology and firmly believing in the goals of the state. The two films *Sophie Scholl* and *Elser* both have Gestapo officers attempting to get the protagonists, their prisoners, to confess and give the names of accomplices. In *Elser*, the officer quickly resorts to torture, stating his disgust with the prisoner who attempted to kill Hitler and expressing no remorse for his pain. The officer in *Sophie Scholl* does not employ physical torture, but fervently argues with Scholl when she insults the state, becoming agitated when she continues to resist and contradict him. The stately office he has and the suits he wears place him amongst the ranks of ordinary, controlled police. It is when Scholl argues against him that this façade cracks, exposing his fanaticism. In the face of unbreaking heroes, these officers are quick to anger and lash out against the people working against the state they believe in. They are lacking in empathy and understanding, rendering them completely unable to comprehend the defiance of the protagonists. This lack of empathy, which distinguishes the Gestapo officer from the protagonists and the other characters shown in the film, is suggested to be the very reason why they are working with the regime in the first place. Totalitarianism, therefore, comes not from the consent of the public, but from the zealous belief and inhumanity of those working for the system. The emphasis on extreme beliefs in Nazism distance the Gestapo officers in films from their audience; the lack of films exploring other avenues of complicity and guilt that brought people into either the Gestapo or Nazism more generally further this distance.

Since other modes of complicity are not explored, the films surveyed create the impression that only fanatical believers in Nazism and heartless careerists became involved with the Gestapo. This separation implicitly absolves the audience of guilt and the fear that they could have performed the same role, given the circumstances.

Public participation is much more likely to appear in films handling the Stasi, especially due to the prominence of informant stories in the post-reunification media. Specific images are often associated with the informants recruited by the Stasi. Many of the characters used by the Stasi to gather information are women. Of the eight films with informants, two have men working with the Stasi: *Der Tunnel* and *Liebe Mauer.* None of the informants in the films surveyed began working for the Stasi willingly. These people are often intimidated, coerced, or blackmailed into turning on their friends and family. One of the common tactics used by the Stasi is to threaten to place children into state custody, used against many of the women in the films. This appeal to the motherly instincts of women is an effective weapon and convinces these women to agree to work with the Stasi. It is implied by several films that such a tactic would not work on men. The men who do fall in with the Stasi are shown to be weak for failing to stand against the organization.

As an example, the male informant in *Der Tunnel,* Theo Lohmann, is feminized by the film in many ways. As his wife attempts to connect with her brother in order to escape the DDR via a tunnel under the newly constructed Berlin Wall, Lohmann is convinced to work alongside the Stasi, who promise him a promotion in exchange for information about the escape plan. Lohmann is shown to be the weaker of the pair over the course of the film, and his wife even plans on leaving him behind, heading to the tunnel with their daughter without informing him. Later in the film, Lohmann is entrusted with another woman's baby as she leaves to distract the Stasi; he heads to

meet the rest of the group and eventually carries the baby under the wall. At the end of the film, he remains holding the baby, placed firmly in the feminized role of childcare.

The perceived difference in mental fortitude between men and women is evoked in *Der Stich des Skorpion*. While the main character's wife is in custody, the interrogating officer threatens to take her child and ominously informs her that any lies could lead to the deaths of those she knows. Upon her return, her husband immediately asks if she agreed to work with the Stasi, leading her to be disgusted with his assumption that she would crack. At the end of the film, he heads to the Stasi archives in Berlin and discovers that 14 people, including his wife after her arrest crossing the border, were involved with his surveillance. He returns home to find she has committed suicide, unable to face him know that he knows the truth.

These films rely on heavily on informants in order to push the story further and create drama. These informants, in turn, are often women or feminized in keeping with stereotypes about women and their susceptibility to psychological pressures. Films have an overemphasis on the roles informants played and the personal connections between informants and those they were spying on. All of the informants in the films surveyed had personnel connections to their targets, and seven out of eight were a friend or family member. These people were also intimately watched, and the fictional Stasi often had a singular or main point of contact to their person of interest. The time individuals spent under surveillance is sharply cut; the majority of those under Stasi surveillance were watched for an average of nine years (Bruce 104). In films, the protagonists are watched for at most several months. The shortened length of surveillance and the emphasis on friends and family members acting as informants seriously downplays the role of strangers and coworkers who worked for the Stasi as well as the abilities of the Stasi itself.

The overuse of informants places blame on the general population. This blame is avoided for the population of Nazi Germany in Gestapo films, where very few members of the public directly interact with the Gestapo despite the historically high number of denunciations and public collaboration. However, films explain the plight of informants by presenting them as being blackmailed or coerced into compliance, rather than working with the Stasi of their own free will. This emphasis ignores the thousands of people who willingly worked with and gave information to the Stasi, and the many positive incentives the Stasi gave to informants working with them. Informants, both real and fictional, sometimes also attempt to downplay their actions by claiming they weren't harming anyone, or that the damage they did was minor and not physical, unlike the harm brought to victims of the Nazi regime. The nature of persecution under the Stasi, which did not often result in the deaths of its targets, in many ways allows a greater exploration of the guilt and complicity of people in the DDR than those living in Nazi Germany. Rather than being willingly complicit in the deaths of others, informants for the Stasi are shown to be forced into helping a system do relatively minor damage to others.

The issue of informants is also discussed in documentaries. In *Anderson*, a documentary focusing on the literary figure and infamous Stasi informant Sascha Anderson, various people who had worked with the Stasi, including Anderson himself, claim their work did little harm. Anderson shows practically no remorse for his actions, implying he has no need for forgiveness and did nothing to his fellow artists. He states, "I can say, ok, that went terribly, that whole story, but even so I am loyal."[2] While not taking pride in his work as an informant, Anderson prides himself on his loyalty to the organization and Socialism as a whole. His attitude is highly defensive throughout the film, and he points out several other prominent artists and editors who were also involved with

[2]"Ich kann sagen, ok, das ist scheiße gelaufen, der ganzen Geschichte, aber trotzdem bin ich loyal." Translation mine.

the Stasi to push blame away from himself. Anderson's attempts to mitigate the damage he personally did to others generate mixed reactions from his friends and associates interviewed throughout the film, much like the reaction of the wider German public to the informants exposed by the Stasi files.

Conclusion

The Gestapo and the Stasi retain importance in German history and culture, especially now. The Historikerstreit of the 1980s and the reunification of Germany in 1990 reframed the deeds of these organizations in the last few decades, and a plethora of media has now been produced about them. These two systems garnered more power and influence than their original charters mandated and employed varying degrees of violence, coercion, blackmail, and intimidation to get the information they wanted. Both were reliant on the cooperation of the public, whether given willingly or forced. For the Gestapo, much of this cooperation came in the form of denunciations, or testimony given to the police by individuals. These were given willingly and were vital to the Gestapo's ability to function. For the Stasi, public cooperation came from people agreeing to be informants for the organization. These informants were brought into the organization, whether attracted by the potential rewards, convinced of the need of the state, or pressured into compliance by officers. Through these informants, the Stasi developed a complex and robust network of information on millions of people, both within and without the DDR.

In the past three decades, the film industry has used these organizations as a basis for new stories. The twenty films discussed in this paper are only a sample of the media regarding these systems that exist. Beyond them are hundreds more films in a variety of languages, each with its own interpretation of the organizations. For many Germans and others, these films are their chance to see the worlds of Nazi Germany and the DDR. As time continues on, audiences will be further

and further removed from these historical time periods. Fewer people will have personal experience of them and the systems that dominated them. Films will then replace much of the stories that once came from friends, family, and acquaintances. Despite their fictional aspects and many flaws, films will become, or have already become, the main source of information about the past for audiences.

The patterns described above suggest an avoidance of admitting public complicity in either organization. Informants are a prominent piece of the Stasi's functioning, both historically and in fiction, but many films paint them as additional victims. Though public participation is shown, in no film does an informant willingly decide to work for the Stasi. Only one film has an instance of denunciation given to the Gestapo, while the others avoid the topic of denunciations and public participation in the regime. The trauma of Nazi Germany and the damage done by the Gestapo still leave deep scars on society, ones that run deeper than those left by Socialism. As such, the Stasi remain a simpler, safer topic for films to explore. While there are informants and spies who work with the officers in films, it is made clear that these people were coerced, blackmailed, or otherwise threatened, or did not fully understand what was at stake when they were approached by the officer. This tactic does not implicate the audience or those they may know. Public cooperation, when it does occur, is forced; the audience is able to see these individuals as more victims of the state than willing participants in persecution. By avoiding instances of public cooperation with either state, these films confine the functioning of the police state to the police.

"The *Holocaust* television movie opened the floodgates. It seemed as if for the first time an entire nation dared to remember and to look at its own past" (Kaes 786). Kaes' assessment, written in 1997, came prematurely. While *Holocaust* did spark a movement in Germany to produce content at home relating to the Holocaust and oppressive systems like the Gestapo and Stasi, this

look into the German past remains shallow and simplistic. What is captured on screen and then presented to audiences as a taste of the Nazi Period or the DDR is in fact far from the historical reality. While films should not be expected to be completely accurate, especially when they are fictional stories made for entertainment, the pieces that are brushed over and left out are precisely those that need exposure. In avoiding depicting the involvement of ordinary citizens in persecution, films avoid confronting an ugly truth. Both the Gestapo and the Stasi were only able to function based on significant and freely given cooperation from the public. In these films, that aspect of the police states is lost and the complicity of the population never shown.

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