The Lives of Others:
East German State Security
Service's Archival Legacy

Karsten Jedlitschka

Abstract

The Stasi Records Office (BStU) preserves the records of the former German Democratic Republic's (GDR) State Security Service (Staatssicherheit) and makes them available for various purposes. The Stasi documents pose unusual and exceptional challenges for the archivists who work with them. The files show the methods and broad range of a secret police's work. They also prove the paranoia of a communist police state and finally the hubris of trying to control peoples' minds. The BStU is a unique institution; with more than 518,000 linear feet of archival files and audiovisual media, it is one of the largest archives in Germany. It demonstrates the importance and power of archives serving the public good.

I n 2007, a German dramatic film received worldwide attention. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*) played to critical success throughout the United States, eventually winning the Oscar for best foreign language film.[1] The film portrays how the agents of the former East German Secret Police, the State Security Service (German Staatssicherheit, or "Stasi"), monitored East Berlin's cultural scene. Donnersmarck provides a nightmarish glimpse inside the daily workings of the secret police, showing methods and equipment of oppression and persecution during this period of communist dictatorship in East Germany. What the film does not address in such detail is the Stasi's information management system,

[1] Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der Anderen*, directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck (2005, Germany). See Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der Anderen. Filmbuch* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006).

its technologies, and its methods of recordkeeping.[2] Neither does it provide detailed information about the Stasi's archival heritage, or its dimensions and challenges.

This article examines these aspects of intelligence history. The first part provides information about the Stasi, its proportions, tasks, and methods. The second part tells the story of the Stasi's demise in the so-called Peaceful Revolution of fall 1989 and the establishment of the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic (Bundesbeauftragter für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR, or BStU), the Stasi Records Office. A third part focuses on the archival legacy in greater detail. Finally, the last part outlines how access to the Stasi records serves the public good.

The East German State Security Service (Staatssicherheit)

The Staatssicherheit, Stasi for short, like all such police services in communist countries, handled both domestic and foreign tasks. It combined the roles of intelligence service and secret police but also acted as an agency of criminal prosecution. In fact, it could exercise legal powers similar to those of the public prosecutors. Over the decades, the apparatus grew into a large-scale bureaucracy with numerous additional jobs: It provided bodyguards, placed passport inspectors at border crossings, monitored the flow of traffic between East and West Germany, and was involved in the weapons and technology trades. The Stasi was an enormous organization, with ninety-one thousand full-time employees in three territorial levels. Its huge apparatus included the Berlin Headquarters, fifteen Regional Administrative Offices, and more than two hundred District Offices. In addition, as of 1989, the agency still employed 189,000 so-called unofficial informants (Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter). Based on what is known about the comings and goings of such informants, their numbers can be estimated at more than half a million for the entire period from 1950 to 1989. Given that the total population of the GDR was 16.4 million in 1989, the ratio of Stasi employees to citizens can be estimated at 1 to 180,

---

[2] There is little research on these special aspects of German intelligence history; see Wolfgang Krieger, "German Intelligence History. A Field of Search of Scholars," *Intelligence and National Security* 19 (2004): 185–98; Wolfgang Krieger, *Geschichte der Geheimdienste. Von den Pharaonen bis zur CIA (*Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009).

F I G U R E I . The headquarters of the Staatssicherheit in Berlin, Normannenstrasse (BStU, Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (MfS), Hauptabteilung (HA) II, Fo 32, No. 8)

whereas the Russian KGB in 1990 numbered only one employee for every 595 soviet citizens.[3]

Within the framework of its encompassing mandate to protect the Communist Party's rule, the Stasi was assigned a broad range of duties. These targeted not only large segments of the GDR population but also West Germans and foreigners. It is nearly impossible to estimate how many individuals were affected by the Stasi's various activities during the forty years of communist dictatorship in the GDR. Without underestimating, it can be assumed that affected individuals numbered several million—in other words, a significant proportion of the GDR's total population.

[3] Jens Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter der Staatssicherheit. Personalstruktur und Lebenswelt 1950–1989/90* (Berlin: Links, 2000), 538. For information about the structure and tasks of the Stasi, see Jens Gieseke, *Die DDR-Staatssicherheit. Schild und Schwert der Partei* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2001). Gieseke offers an analysis based on broad scholarship in *Die Stasi 1945–1990* (Munich: Pantheon, 2011). For the history of the headquarters area, see Karsten Jedlitschka, "Allmacht und Ohnmacht. Das Zentralarchiv der Staatssicherheit," in *Archive unter Dach und Fach. Bau, Logistik, Wirtschaftlichkeit. 80. Deutscher Archivtag in Dresden,* ed. Heiner Schmitt (Fulda: Verlagsdruckerei Schmidt, 2011), 175–92 and Christian Halbrock, *Mielkes Revier. Stadtraum und Alltag rund um die MfS-Zentrale in Berlin-Lichtenberg* (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2010).

F I G U R E   2 . Index card of the central card file on individuals (with anonymized personal data)

One indication of the extent of the Stasi's surveillance activities is the size of the extant central card file on individuals, which was compiled by the Stasi and includes information on six million people, among them about one million West Germans (see Figure 2). The degree to which these individuals were affected varies considerably. Activities ranged from routine security checks, attempts at recruitment, and various types of police surveillance, to conviction and imprisonment by the courts that adjudicated so-called political crimes under the influence of the Stasi. Accordingly, the personal files of the Stasi vary both in volume and in nature. They include records with only a few pages, which are of limited use for evidence of surveillance, up to files containing more than a hundred volumes and nearly complete biographical documentation of large segments of individuals' lives. The variety of file categories is considerable, with the most important among them being, first, files concerning unofficial informants or unsuccessful attempts at recruitment. Surveillance files, which often include proof of undercover interference in the lives of the individuals affected, are next most important. Such activities included removing the individuals from their positions and *Zersetzungsmaßnahmen* (conspiratorial measures designed to demoralize individuals and thus prevent them from participating in activities that could harm the state and the party). The third

most important files comprise the "Investigational Procedures," which are collections of all files related to individual criminal matters investigated by the Stasi, including files of the prosecution, court records, and files concerning the execution of sentences.[4]

The entire range of Stasi activities became transparent only after 1989, yet its massive presence in GDR society had long been felt, notwithstanding its largely secret and conspiratorial nature. Infiltration, intimidation, and collaboration characterized the East German communist dictatorship. It was a totalitarian police state, and, while less brutal than the Third Reich and far less damaging to its neighbors, it was even more quietly pervasive in its domestic control. The crucial element of power in the GDR was the myth of an omnipotent and omnipresent surveillance institution, allowing for rule by fear rooted in both knowledge and the lack thereof. By generating insecurity and uncertainty, the Stasi stabilized the rule of the Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei, or SED), the GDR's Communist Party, and ensured that the majority of the population would be obedient. Oxford historian Timothy Garton Ash, living briefly in East Berlin during the 1980s as a doctoral student, describes the atmosphere in his diary: "Suspicion is everywhere. It strikes in the bar, it lurks in the telephone, it travels with you in the train. Wherever two or three are gathered together, there suspicion will be."[5]

The Collapse of the Stasi in the "Peaceful Revolution" of 1989 and the Establishment of the Stasi Records Office

The Stasi's demise came suddenly in the autumn of 1989, when hundreds of thousands of East German citizens took to the streets and toppled the communist dictatorship in the Peaceful Revolution.[6] Stasi employees hastily

---

[4] Roger Engelmann, "Zum Quellenwert der Unterlagen des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit," in *Aktenlage. Die Bedeutung der Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes für die Zeitgeschichtsforschung*, ed. Klaus-Dietmar Henke and Roger Engelmann (Berlin: Links, 1995), 23–55.

[5] Timothy Garton Ash, *The File: A Personal History* (New York: Random House, 1997), 72. The British historian Timothy Garton Ash, a victim of GDR Secret Police, published a diary-like narrative tracing the process of reading one's file and reliving events that were being observed and recorded. See also Timothy Garton Ash, *We the People: The Revolution of 89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (London: Penguin Books, 1999).

[6] Christoph Boyer, "1989 und die Wege dorthin," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 59 (2011): 101–18; Marianne Birthler, "The Peaceful Revolution of the Fall of 1989," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 44 (Spring 2009): 43–57; Charles S. Maier, "Essay: Die ostdeutsche Revolution," in *Revolution und Vereinigung 1989/90. Als in Deutschland die Realität die Phantasie überholte*, ed. Klaus-Dietmar Henke (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2009), 553–75; Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, *Endspiel. Die Revolution von 1989 in der DDR* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009); Andreas Rödder, *Deutschland einig Vaterland. Die Geschichte der Wiedervereinigung* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009); Joachim Gauck, "Wir sagen unserer Angst auf Wiedersehen! Von der Auflösung der Stasi zum Stasiunterlagengesetz," in *Die demokratische Revolution 1989 in der DDR*, ed. Eckart Conze et al. (Cologne: Böhlau, 2009), 170–81. For an interesting account from outside, see Anna Funder, *Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall* (London: Granta Publications, 2004).

F I G U R E   3 .   Occupation of the Stasi headquarters in Berlin, January 15, 1990 (photo: Andreas Schoelzel)

destroyed records and files, the incriminating evidence of forty years of intelligence-gathering activity. They shredded, dissolved, or burned huge numbers of documents, but plumes of smoke revealed their attempts. Civil rights activists occupied Stasi buildings and stopped the destruction. These efforts saved immense mountains of records, loose and jumbled documents, miles of shelving full of archives files, and more than 15,500 bags of shredded material.

Just one month later, in January 1990, the East German government was forced to dissolve the Stasi. More than forty years of nearly unrestrained power ended within less than four months. Everyone, including Stasi employees and high-profile politicians, from experts to ordinary citizens, were simply stunned by the pace of change. The bloodless revolution signaled a time, as one historian stated, when reality beat fantasy.[7] It was also the beginning of a social and political debate that culminated with the files of the dreaded secret police being opened up in accordance with a new law. Several arguments played an important role in this debate: first, that people who had been observed, harassed, and persecuted by the Stasi wanted to and should be given the opportunity to reconstruct their fate with the help of the files. The second argument went

---

[7] Klaus-Dietmar Henke, ed., *Revolution und Vereinigung 1989/90. Als in Deutschland die Realität die Phantasie überholte* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2009). This groundbreaking volume offers a good overview of current scholarship on the Peaceful Revolution. See further the inspiring introduction in Eckhard Jesse, *Systemwechsel in Deutschland. 1918/19 - 1933 - 1945/49 - 1989/90* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2010), 17–32.

FIGURE 4. **Former guard-house in the Stasi headquarters with the inscription "freedom for my file" (photo: BStU/Böger, 1990)**

that the files should help answer questions concerning guilt and responsibility. Unofficial Stasi informers who had betrayed their fellow human beings should not be allowed to take over public functions or hold political office. The final argument claimed that the files of the Stasi should be used to research the structures, objectives, and methods of the secret police to provide the public with this information.[8]

The Stasi Records Office (BStU) was set up in 1990, following German reunification. Its headquarters is located in Berlin, and it has twelve local branches organized according to the former East German districts. As of October 2011, the BStU employed around sixteen hundred people, with roughly a thousand at the main headquarters in Berlin. A special law, the Stasi Records Act (Stasi-Unterlagen-Gesetz, or StUG) of 20 December 1991, guarantees the public's right to information and the individual's right to privacy. Since these two principles are often considered contradictory, the first section ("General Provisions, Purpose and Scope") of the StUG is worth quoting exactly as translated by the BStU:[9]

> This Act regulates the custody, preparation, administration and use of the records of the Ministry for State Security of the former German Democratic

---

[8] See Silke Schumann, *Vernichten oder Offenlegen? Zur Entstehung des Stasi-Unterlagen-Gesetzes. Eine Dokumentation der öffentlichen Debatte 1990/91* (Berlin: BStU = Der Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR, 1997).

[9] Act regarding the records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic (Stasi Records Act, StUG) of 20 December 1991, eighth law for the amendment of the Stasi-Documents-Law of 22 December 2011 (Federal Law Gazette I P. 3106), § 1. The complete text of the Stasi Records Act is available in pamphlet form from the BStU and on the Web in both German and English, http://www.bstu.bund.de, accessed 3 April 2012.

Republic and its preceding and succeeding organizations (State Security Service) in order to

1. facilitate individual access to personal data which the State Security Service has stored regarding them, so that they can clarify what influence the state security service has had on their personal destiny;

2. protect the individual from impairment of their right to privacy being caused by use of the personal data stored by the State Security Service;

3. ensure and promote the historical, political, and juridical reappraisal of the activities of the State Security Service;

4. provide public and private bodies with access to the information required to achieve the purposes stated in this Act.

Within the regulations of the Stasi Records Act, files are accessible for the purposes of individual consultation, rehabilitation, so-called lustration (purge), prosecution, and historical research. Maybe the most important purpose is the right of victims to see their personal files so as to reconstruct and understand those events in their lives. Also, they need this evidence for rehabilitation and pension or reparation claims. The law also gives the government access to the files to evaluate the past of job applicants and screen out former spies and informants from public jobs (lustration). Especially in the early 1990s, the files were also used to prosecute crimes committed during GDR times (e.g., shootings at the former GDR border, capital offenses, white-collar crimes, etc.). Finally, this immense archival legacy is a singular source not only for research in intelligence history, but also for many other aspects of (East) German and European history. All in all this law broke new ground in jurisprudence. Never before had files maintained by a secret police been made accessible to the public to such a wide extent.[10]

The original plan to hand the Stasi records over to the German Federal Archives was abandoned in favor of a special regime of legal regulation. Because of the illegal nature[11] of their compilation, and the fact that they are particularly worthy of protection, the Stasi documents require more stringent rules for storage and use than do typical administrative or party files. At the same time,

---

[10] Roger Engelmann, "The Opening of the Stasi Records and Collective Memories. Under the Aspect of Personal Inspection of Records," in *Legal Institutions and Collective Memories*, ed. Susanne Karstedt (Oxford: Hart Publisher, 2006), 329–39; Roger Engelmann, "Der Weg zum Stasi-Unterlagen-Gesetz," in *Stasi-Akten zwischen Politik und Zeitgeschichte. Eine Zwischenbilanz*, eds. Siegfried Suckut and Jürgen Weber (Munich: Olzog, 2003), 81–100; Dagmar Unverhau, *Das Stasi-Unterlagen-Gesetz im Lichte von Datenschutz und Archivgesetzgebung. Referate der Tagung des BStU vom 26.-28.11.1997* (Münster: LIT, 2003); Albert Engel, *Die rechtliche Aufarbeitung der Stasi-Unterlagen auf der Grundlage des StUG* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1995).

[11] The constitution of the GDR assured civil rights—which the Stasi ignored (e.g., by monitoring of mail and telephone conversations). The Stasi simply did not care about legal regulations, even of the GDR. And there was no way to go to court against the Stasi.

they had to be made accessible promptly and without periods of restriction. They also had to be safeguarded from political influence and from misuse in a manner that would seem credible to the general public. This meant, among other things, their supervision by an independent commissioner elected by the German Parliament, not by a government ministry. Thus, the StUG as a *lex specialis* differs in several respects from the general German archives acts, and for good reason. As noted, there are no periods of restriction; files can be used immediately. On the other hand—to reconcile the right to know and the right to privacy—the StUG eliminates the basic principle of equal access to files that contain personal data. This concerns the principle of control of one's personal data, which had been developed in the Federal Republic during the 1980s. So the StUG gives precedence over all other (conflicting) interests to the rights of individuals to obtain access to their files and knowledge about all information that had been collected about them. Victims can view their own files but cannot access those of others. They can get copies of their files, but information on other victims and third parties is redacted. Also, while protecting the privacy rights of the victims and of third parties, a well-thought-out exception is made to German privacy law (Datenschutz). The StUG enables victims of spying access to the identities of those who informed on them by identifying code names and decoding pseudonyms.[12] Over the last two decades, the StUG has stood the test, proving itself a successful model for "balancing the conflicts between transparency, privacy, and security."[13]

The Archival Legacy: Dimensions and Challenges

The BStU houses an enormous and unique archival legacy: roughly 325,000 linear feet of paper records (files, documents, maps, technical drawings), around 39,000 linear feet of Stasi finding aids (index catalogs, about thirty-nine million index cards), approximately 154,000 linear feet of documents stored on microfiche, and more than 15,500 bags of shredded Stasi files. The Stasi also used all kinds of audiovisual records, such as 1.56 million images (photographs, negatives, slides), around 34,200 sound, video, and

---

[12] §§ 3-5, 12-15 StUG.

[13] Elena S. Danielson, "Privacy Rights and the Rights of Political Victims: Implications of the German Experience," *The American Archivist* 67 (Fall/Winter 2004): 176–93; Kai Bonitz, *Persönlichkeitsrechtsschutz im Stasi-Unterlagen-Gesetz* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 2009). For perspectives on how the Stasi Records Act fits into existing German privacy legislation and archival law, see Reinhard Heydenreuter in "Ist die Gauck-Behörde ein Archiv?," ed. Dagmar Unverhau (Münster: LIT, 2003), 145–52; Rainer Polley, "StUG und deutsche Archivgesetze. Verwendung der Stasi-Unterlagen und Nutzung von Archivgut nach den deutschen Archivgesetzen insbesondere der neuen Bundesländer," in *Das Stasi-Unterlagen-Gesetz im Lichte von Datenschutz und Archivgesetzgebung*, 153–67. See further, Udo Schäfer, "Transfer and Access—The Core Elements of German Archives Acts," *Archival Science* 3 (2003): 367–77; Rainer Polley, ed., *Archivgesetzgebung in Deutschland—Ungeklärte Rechtsfragen und neue Herausforderungen* (Marburg: Archivschule Marburg, 2003); Klaus Oldenhage, "Die Gesetzgebung zur Sicherung des Archivguts der DDR," *Historisch-Politische Zeitschrift* 2 (1995): 300–307.

film recordings on a variety of media, and forty-four Stasi data projects.[14] All together, the archives of the Federal Commissioner stores more than 518,000 linear feet of Stasi files, which is roughly half the size of the holdings of the German Federal Archives (German Bundesarchiv).[15]

The massive dimensions and variety of this archival legacy mirror very strikingly the rapid expansion and diverse functions of the Stasi itself. Looking at this mass of materials, one could state at first glance that the Stasi actually became dysfunctional because it could not continue to process the steadily increasing amount of information it was taking in. But this is not the case as its information management, storage, and distribution system worked extremely well right up to the very end. Rather, the paralysis of the gerontocratic leadership of the SED caused the implosion of the GDR dictatorship. The leaders did not react to Stasi reports in time, they were undecided, and they did not set clear goals for the secret police. Hence, Stasi employees lost direction and motivation, infected by the party's paralysis. As a result, one of the most efficient secret police states broke down without a single gunshot. In one sense, the Stasi's frustration and disillusion were part of the Peaceful Revolution.[16]

In the last two decades, the archives division has been working diligently to make the archive fonds searchable and accessible. To date, approximately 86 percent of all Stasi records are ready for use. Still, the archivists face many challenges. These challenges result from two general conditions that greatly affect their archival work: first, the specific legal regulations and requirements of the StUG; and, second, the unique dimensions, structure, and shape of the Stasi's records and archival material.

---

[14] *Zehnter Tätigkeitsbericht der Bundesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Berlin: BStU 2011), 29–49; Birgit Salamon, "Das archivische Erbe der Staatssicherheit," *Das Archivwesen der DDR. Was bleibt? Eine Bilanz 20 Jahre nach der deutschen Einheit. Archivwissenschaftliches Kolloquium der Archivschule Marburg* (Marburg: Archivschule Marburg, 2011), 85–105; Birgit Salamon, "Die Archive der Bundesbeauftragten (BStU) für die Stasiunterlagen—Die archivfachliche Arbeit an den MfS-Geheimdienstunterlagen—Fragen und Herausforderungen," *Der Archivar* 55 (2002): 203–7; Karsten Jedlitschka, "Archivierte Diktatur. Die Überlieferungen der DDR-Staatssicherheit," *Scrinium* 65 (2011): 61–79.

[15] The German Federal Archives keeps records totaling nearly 306,000 linear meters, (over 1 million linear feet. Compare *Wissen bereitstellen. Quellen erschließen. Geschichtsverständnis fördern. Tätigkeitsbericht 2009/2010*, ed. German Federal Archives (Berlin: Bundesarchiv, 2010), 37. For perspectives on the German federal and local archives system, see Nils Bruebach, "Archival Science in Germany—Traditions, Developments and Perspectives," *Archival Science* 3 (2003): 379–99.

[16] See Jens Gieseke, "'Seit Langem angestaute Unzufriedenheit breitester Bevölkerungskreise'—Das Volk in den Stimmungsberichten des Staatssicherheitsdienstes," in *Revolution und Vereinigung 1989/90. Als in Deutschland die Realität die Phantasie überholte*, ed. Klaus-Dietmar Henke (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2009), 130–48; Jens Gieseke, "Annäherungen und Fragen an die 'Meldungen aus der Republik,'" in *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft. Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR*, ed. Jens Gieseke (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2007), 79–98; Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern*, 134–61; Daniela Münkel, "Die DDR im Blick der Stasi 1989," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 21–22 (2009): 26–32; Walter Süß, "Der Untergang der Staatspartei," in *Revolution und Vereinigung 1989/90. Als in Deutschland die Realität die Phantasie überholte,* ed. Klaus-Dietmar Henke (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2009), 284–306; Walter Süß, *Die Staatssicherheit im letzten Jahrzehnt der DDR. Geschichte der Staatssicherheit, Teil III* (Berlin: BStU 2009), 93–108.

For reasons of legal checks and scholarship, the StUG doesn't have periods of restriction—in contrast to those required by general German Archives acts.[17] Files are often released in a very rough-and-ready way. On the other hand, screenings of public employees and legal prosecutions require a very accurate and precise archival description and indexing system that is more detailed than that required by common German archives. This means that even more time and resources are needed for archival arrangement and description.

There are also many archival tasks specific to the Stasi archives. While, as a general rule, fundamental archival principles apply to work with the Stasi archives, the archivists must focus closely and accurately on the specific structure of this secret police, its tasks, and its files. Behind the apparent lack of records organization might be a hidden institutional logic. So the principles of provenance, "respect des fonds," and original order must be precisely maintained. Classification and description must mirror the activity of the respective departments. Also, the evolution of the structure and responsibilities over the forty-year existence of the Stasi must be analyzed, along with administrative dependencies. In addition, the massive dimensions of the Stasi's archival legacy pose logistical and professional challenges. To make things even more difficult, in the fall of 1989, Stasi employees demolished a significant part of the records, disturbing their provenance, internal structure, and state of order, or even the records themselves. Therefore, BStU archivists must rearrange and even rebuild Stasi archives fonds, files, and documents scrupulously while protecting, as far as possible, the original, logical system and context of the records—the basis for the files' authenticity and reliability—to be accepted as credible evidence, especially for legal purposes. As a result, the archivists need a very profound knowledge of the organizational structure and operative work of the Stasi—and very solid archival training. It took years to develop this expertise since the Stasi did not leave organizational plans or instructions for index card systems to the BStU archivists. So the archivists had to do a lot of detective work searching and analyzing tons of files to reconstruct such structural plans, diagrams, guidelines, internal regulations and rules, and so on. Finally, needless to say, the preservation of hundreds of thousands of paper files and photographic and audiovisual media incurs not only great effort but expense as well.

Four archival tasks will be discussed in more detail: first, the challenge of coping with Stasi files found outside BStU archives, and vice versa—that is, the search for archival materials from other provenances and their return to the original institutions; second, the reconstruction of more than 15,500 bags of shredded Stasi files; third, the decryption and preservation of Stasi's electronic

---

[17] Polley, "StUG und deutsche Archivgesetze," 160–61; Danielson, "Privacy Rights and the Rights of Political Victims," 179–84.

FIGURE 5. Stasi's special containers for microfilms. In an emergency case or state of defense these containers would have been easy to rescue (photo: Anja Bohnhof, "Zu den Akten," Potsdam 2011).

data files; finally, the description and preservation of the immense audiovisual and photographic fonds in the BStU archives.

In Search of Stasi Files

The Stasi produced tons of documents spread throughout the headquarters in Berlin, the district and local offices, some special offices, and hundreds of secret (*konspirative*) flats and buildings. The pace of the Peaceful Revolution made it simply impossible to get a comprehensive view of the total Stasi archival legacy. Also, during the existence of the Stasi and in the revolutionary period of 1989 to 1990, documents got lost or were stolen by foreign agencies and ordinary people. Furthermore, in the course of German reunification, some files ended up in other administrative offices and archives. Finally, agencies, public authorities, and the public prosecution service used a lot of files in the course of their work. Therefore, especially in the early 1990s, several Stasi records were found and handed over to the BStU archives.[18] For example, the U.S. Central

---

[18] See Karsten Jedlitschka and Stephan Wolf, "Den Akten der Staatssicherheit auf der Spur. Bilanz nach zwei Jahrzehnten," *Jahrbuch der Juristischen Zeitgeschichte* 11 (2010): 115–40; Karsten Jedlitschka and Stephan Wolf, "20 Jahre Bewegung. Beständezuwächse und Abgaben in den Archiven des BStU," *Archivalische Zeitschrift* 92 (2011, in press).

F I G U R E 6 . Room with modern machines to research the Stasi's central card file with around 5 million index cards (photo: Anja Bohnhof, "Zu den Akten")

Intelligence Agency transferred a remarkable fonds in 2000 and 2001. The "Rosenholz" files contained around three hundred thousand sets of data—digital images from microfilms of Stasi central index card files. Stasi foreign intelligence (Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung, or HV A) used this index card system to administer its spies and the information they gathered. It is still unclear how this important material was transferred to the CIA in 1989 and 1990.[19] In 2005, a significant discovery was made in a former Stasi outpost in Gosen (near Berlin) where the HV A trained its spies. It also maintained there a sophisticated studio to produce audio and film recordings. After closing down this building, nobody checked the studio until 2005. The Stasi had stored various technical equipment there, some 382 audio recordings, and 690 videotapes. The materials were valuable supplements to the BStU archival fonds. More Stasi files might possibly be discovered. For example, in summer 2009, a journalist found and transferred a bundle containing fifty-five tapes of the former "Funkstudio Adlershof," a radio station of the Stasi guard in Berlin-Adlershof. In total, over the last two decades, about sixteen thousand linear feet of Stasi records have been found and handed

---

[19] Helmut Müller-Enbergs, *"Rosenholz." Eine Quellenkritik* (Berlin: BStU 2007); Helmut Müller-Enbergs, "Kleine Geschichte zum Findhilfsmittel namens 'Rosenholz'," *Deutschland-Archiv* 36 (2003): 751–61; Robert Gerald Livingston, "Rosenholz. Mischa's Files, CIA's Booty," in *East German Foreign Intelligence: Myth, Reality and Controversy*, ed. Kristie Macrakis et al. (London: Routledge, 2010), 70–87.

over to the BStU archives—a remarkable amount. It often takes a lot of time to analyze these archival files, to verify duplicates, and to describe them accurately.

At the same time, BStU has transferred many files of non-Stasi records to public authorities and other archives. The Stasi gathered or stole these files during the GDR period to use them for its intelligence and repressive purposes. If these records haven't become parts of Stasi files, and if there are no signs of Stasi work on or in them, BStU returns these files to the former owners.

By far the biggest archival fond of this type is the so-called NS-archive. Over the years, the Stasi gathered roughly thirty thousand linear feet of documents and files of the Third Reich. Creating the special "NS-archive," the Stasi used this material for propaganda campaigns against West Germany during the Cold War. Some West German officials and politicians were involved in Nazi war crimes or had high positions in Nazi Germany. The Stasi used the files to prove these charges, sometimes also manipulating documents to get such proof. Prominent cases were those of Heinrich Lübke (1894–1972), German president from 1959 to 1969, and Theodor Oberländer (1905–1998), minister for refugees and displaced persons from 1953 to 1960. Whereas Lübke could document the Stasi's manipulation of the files, Oberländer had to leave office— a big success of the Stasi campaign.[20] This NS-archive, containing files of fifty-three hundred different provenances, was handed over to the German Federal Archives in 1990.[21] But interesting discoveries remain in other Stasi archive fonds. In 2008, BStU archivists found thirteen volumes about the 1930s court case concerning the killing of the Nazi hero Horst Wessel. Since there weren't any signs of Stasi processing, the files were given to the Berlin city archives.[22]

Destroyed, yet Not Lost: The Reconstruction of Shredded Stasi Files

One unique archival task pertaining to the Stasi records is the reconstruction of the 15,500 bags of shredded files. In 1995, a working group started to organize these papers and to reconstruct them, like a giant puzzle, as far as possible. So far, nearly four hundred bags with roughly 1.1 million sheets have been painstakingly pieced together by hand. More than fifteen years of reconstruction has brought valuable results: 75 percent of the documents refer to the last years of the GDR (1985–1989), 40 percent of the documents refer to

---

[20] Henry Leide, *NS-Verbrecher und Staatssicherheit. Die geheime Vergangenheitspolitik der DDR* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2005); Philipp-Christian Wachs, *Der Fall Oberländer (1905–1998). Ein Lehrstück deutscher Geschichte* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2000).

[21] Dagmar Unverhau, *Das "NS-Archiv" des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit. Stationen einer Entwicklung* (Münster: LIT, 2004).

[22] See, in part on the basis of these records, Daniel Siemens, *Horst Wessel. Tod und Verklärung eines Nationalsozialisten* (Munich: Siedler, 2009).

F I G U R E 7 . Racks with bags of shredded Stasi files (photo: Anja Bohnhof, "Zu den Akten")

operations current in 1989, and 25 percent of the documents contained missing parts of other preserved Stasi files. The reconstructed files give important information about the observation and suppression of churches, universities, the media, artists, and political opposition in the GDR. They add more detailed information about some aspects of Stasi foreign intelligence activities, counterintelligence measures, and the Stasi's support of West German and international terrorism.

Since it would take far too long to continue reconstructing manually, BStU hopes to speed the process up by using sophisticated computer technology which is currently being developed for virtual reconstruction. This technology uses certain features and attributes such as shape, color, edges, paper design, script, and so on. So far, only a pilot version of this virtual reconstruction technology has been undertaken.[23]

---

[23] Andreas Petter, "Die Rekonstruktion zerrissener Stasi-Unterlagen. Ursachen und Perspektive einer besonderen Fachaufgabe," *Journal der juristischen Zeitgeschichte* 2 (2009): 61–64; Giselher Spitzer, "Überlegungen zum Quellenwert 'vorvernichteter' Stasi-Unterlagen für die politisch-historische Aufarbeitung. Diskussion ausgewählter Dokumente und Ergebnisse einer Umfrage bei Experten," in *Virtuelle Rekonstruktion "vorvernichteter" Stasi-Unterlagen. Technologische Machbarkeit und Finanzierbarkeit—Folgerungen für Wissenschaft, Kriminaltechnik und Publizistik*, ed. Johannes Weberling and Giselher Spitzer, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Landesbeauftragter für die Unterlagen der Staatssicherheit der ehemaligen DDR, 2007), 56–94; Helen Pidd, "Germans Piece Together Millions of Lives Spied on by Stasi," *The Guardian* 13 March 2011.

F I G U R E   8 . **Various formats of Stasi's electronic data storage devices (photo: BStU)**

Electronic Data Processing

In 1967, Erich Mielke (1907–2000), head of Stasi since 1957, informed high-ranking officers of the department of foreign espionage of his plans to install modern computers. The Stasi established new structures on different levels to introduce electronic data processing (EDP) systems by the end of the 1960s. After first testing French computers, the Stasi decided—in accordance with Soviet Intelligence—to use Siemens systems. They were probably easier to attain in comparison, for example, to IBM computers. Systems made inside the GDR later replaced those computers.[24]

Unfortunately, most of the electronic data carriers were destroyed in accordance with a fateful resolution of the GDR Council of Ministers on 26 February 1990. Still, civil rights activists saved around twenty thousand disks, magnetic tapes, and other electronic storage devices. The challenging task for BStU archivists is to confirm the Stasi heritage, while paying strict attention to archival principles of provenance, authenticity, and integrity of the electronic data. Archivists must also reconstruct the intricate connections of the documents and their references to each other. In this respect, it was a major achievement when, in 1998, archivists managed to reconstruct the data structure of the

---

[24] Stephan Konopatzky, "Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der SIRA-Datenbanken," in *Das Gesicht dem Westen zu. DDR-Spionage gegen die Bundesrepublik Deutschland,* ed. Georg Herbstritt and Helmut Müller-Enbergs (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2003), 112–32; Herbert Ziehm, "Elektronische Datenträger," *West-Arbeit des MfS. Das Zusammenspiel von "Aufklärung" und "Abwehr,"* ed. Hubertus Knabe (Berlin: Links, 1999), 55–59; Erich Sobeslavsky and Nikolaus Joachim Lehmann, eds., *Zur Geschichte von Rechentechnik und Datenverarbeitung in der DDR 1946–1968* (Dresden: Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung, 1996).

System der Informationsrecherche Aufklärung (SIRA) project of the HV A (foreign espionage). This reconstruction made it possible to specify all the documents an agent provided for the Stasi. It offers deep insight into operations and communication within foreign intelligence.[25]

Audiovisual and Photographic Holdings

The audiovisual (film and video) and photographic (photos and slides) holdings are particularly challenging. Some are difficult to decode, and a broad range of technical equipment is necessary to make them accessible. Preservation of these various and often sensitive materials is also a huge and complex archival task.

Photography was a very important instrument in the Stasi's everyday work. The Stasi used all kinds of cameras and formats (even exotic formats) to produce more than 1.75 million pictures. Photos were taken to document crime scenes, rooms, and buildings, and for espionage and observation (see Figure 9). There are also many photos of internal Stasi events, such as anniversaries or visits from friendly, Eastern Bloc secret police (see Figure 10). In fall 1989, Stasi employees began to destroy not only paper files, but also photographic holdings: disorganizing, rumpling, or even tearing them. Their preservation requires specific archival expertise, and it takes time for BStU archivists to analyze the provenance and restore the original order and context, if this is even possible.

The Stasi used films and videos for operative observations; to document investigations, arrests, interrogations, court cases, disasters, and accidents; for training and propaganda purposes; and to record Western television programs. The BStU archives contains 2,719 Stasi films and roughly 75,000 minutes of video. The oldest film was made in 1933; the most recent in 1990; the majority of these holdings cover the years from 1970 to 1989.[26]

Audio monitoring and recording was another important secret police technique. The Stasi mainly bugged telephones and rooms (see Figure 9). Given that ordinary GDR citizens did not have telephones, such taping merely recorded international calls, the telephone conversations of diplomats

---

[25] Konopatzky, "Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der SIRA-Datenbanken"; Jochen Hecht, "Rosenholz und SIRA—archivalische Quellen zur Geschichte der Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung (HV A) des MfS," in *Hatte "Janus" eine Chance? Das Ende der DDR und die Sicherung einer Zukunft der Vergangenheit*, ed. Dagmar Unverhau (Münster: LIT, 2003), 99–112. See further the 2010 conference report by Uwe Spiekermann, "The Stasi and Its Foreign Intelligence Service," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 47 (Fall 2010): 119–24.

[26] Silvia Oberhack and Katrin Rübenstrunk, "Die bewegten Bilder des ehemaligen Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit: Filme und Videos," *Info* 7 (January 2010): 15–19. Films generally are of specific value for archives and scholarship, see Anja Horstmann, "Film als Archivmedium und Medium des Archivs," in *Archiv—Macht—Wissen. Organisation und Konstruktion von Wissen und Wirklichkeiten in Archiven*, ed. Anja Horstmann and Vanina Kopp (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2010), 191–205.

F I G U R E 9 . **Observation of the Berlin train station Friedrichstraße in the 1980s (BStU, MfS, HA VIII, Fo 467, No. 32–34)**

and journalists, and calls from hotels. However, bugging rooms had a broader application, for which the Stasi relied upon hidden microphones (bugs, directional microphones, etc.).[27] In addition, the Stasi used recordings to document court cases and interrogations, and many unofficial informers used this medium for their reports to the Stasi. In 1990, civil rights activists working in Berlin saved around ninety-one thousand audiotapes in various forms (length, position of track, speed, etc.), while activists working in the district offices rescued approximately seventy-seven thousand tapes (see Figure 12). After the removal of blank or deleted tapes, BStU archives holds today roughly 28,500 sound recordings. Currently, 65 percent have been indexed, representing approximately 27,500 recording hours. The earliest recordings were made in 1946, the latest in 1990; the majority between 1975 and 1989. The physical state of many of the tapes and recordings is very poor, and they need to be digitized quickly before further deterioration sets in. BStU archivists are working very hard to preserve these singular historic sources.[28]

---

[27] Angela Schmole, "Abhören, Beobachten, Verwanzen und Markieren: die Abteilung 26 des MfS," *Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat* 19 (2006): 95–106; Andreas Schmidt, "'Aufklärung' des Funkverkehrs und der Telefongespräche in Westdeutschland—die Hauptabteilung III," in *West-Arbeit des MfS. Das Zusammenspiel von "Aufklärung" und "Abwehr,"* ed. Hubertus Knabe (Berlin: Links, 1999), 205–44.

[28] Katri Jurichs et al., "Die Töne der Staatssicherheit. Die Audioüberlieferung des MfS," *Info* 7 (February 2010): 10–13.

Serving the Public Good

One of the most important duties of the BStU is to give every citizen the right to access his or her files, to find out if he or she has been investigated, manipulated, or persecuted. People also have the right to learn the identity of the informers who spied on them. When the StUG was discussed in Parliament, many politicians feared that the right to access such files would give rise to

F I G U R E   1 0 . The 30th anniversary of the Stasi and reception in 1980 for the Secretary-General of the SED, Erich Honecker (1912–1994) on the left, with the head of Stasi, secretary Erich Mielke (1907–2000) on the right (BStU, MfS, Zentrale Auswertungs. und Informationsgruppe—ZAIG, Fo 885, No. 158)

F I G U R E 1 1 . **Stasi Officer of the Radio Counter-Intelligence Department monitoring telephone conversation (BStU, MfS, HA III, Fo 310, No. 50)**

retaliation and revenge, or a social climate of hate. But no such thing happened. In general, people remained astonishingly level-headed as they learned about the treachery of their colleagues, close friends, or even relatives. There wasn't any bloodshed or cruel revenge, as some politicians feared and as happened in some East European countries, such as Romania.[29] But there was and still is a lively, often fiercely and sometimes polemic, debate in Germany about the GDR's past and the Stasi. From time to time, prominent cases cause special public and media attention. For example, in spring 2009, a former West Berlin police officer was identified as part of the Stasi. Even more important, in 1967, this officer shot a leftist student, and this led to the famous Berlin student riots, the beginning of the so-called 1968 movement in Germany. As a consequence of the 2009 revelation, some journalists even proposed revising 1960s West German history; the media generated a remarkable public debate

---

[29] See Joachim Gauck, *Winter im Sommer. Frühling im Herbst. Erinnerungen,* 14th ed. (Munich: Siedler, 2010), 316–25; Cornelia Vismann, *Akten. Medientechnik und Recht* (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001): 306–15; Danielson, "Privacy Rights and the Rights of Political Victims," 179–84.

F I G U R E   1 2 . **Various Stasi recording media (photo: BStU)**

on this case.[30] Today, debates about the Stasi contacts of a former high-ranking
politician of the 1990s, Manfred Stolpe, or about Rudolf Skoda, architect of the
Gewandhaus concert hall in Leipzig, arouse public attention.[31] Finally, cente-
naries of important historic events, such as the fiftieth anniversary and remem-
brance of the construction of the Berlin Wall (13 August 1961) in 2011, draw
the public's attention to the issues of communist dictatorship and its secret
police in Germany.[32] While supporting and keeping these disputes alive, the

[30] Helmut Müller-Enbergs and Cornelia Jabs, "Der 2. Juni 1967 und die Staatssicherheit," *Deutschland
Archiv* 42 (2009): 3, 395–400; Armin Fuhrer, *Wer erschoss Benno Ohnesorg? Der Fall Kurras und die Stasi*
(Berlin: Bebra, 2009); Sven Felix Kellerhoff, *Die Stasi und der Westen. Der Kurras-Komplex* (Hamburg:
Hoffmann and Campe, 2010). See further, *Reform und Revolte. Politischer und gesellschaftlicher Wandel
in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland vor und nach 1968*, ed. Udo Wengst (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2011).

[31] Armin Görtz, "Der halbe Doppelagent. Gewandhausarchitekt Rudolf Skoda und seine Stasi-Karriere,"
in *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, 20 September 2011, 3; "Stasi-Check Stolpes wirft neue Fragen auf," in
Der Tagesspiegel, 17 September 2011, 21.

[32] Kai Diekmann, *Die Mauer: Fakten, Bilder, Schicksale* (Munich: Piper, 2011); Frederik Taylor and
Klaus-Dieter Schmidt, *Die Mauer: 13. August 1961 bis 9. November 1989* (Munich: Pantheon, 2011);
Die Mauer. Errichtung, Überwindung, Erinnerung, ed. Klaus-Dietmar Henke (Munich: Deutscher
Taschenbuch Verlag, 2011).

opening of the files—no matter how inconvenient—has strengthened the democratic process and helped people to come to terms with the past.

The significance of the inspection of records for those subjected to persecution and repression hardly needs to be further explained. Individual self-determination returns to victims of the dictatorship when they find out the truth and can freely decide how to deal with this knowledge. They become able to "reclaim their own biographies." But even beyond this, confronting one's "own" file—even considering whether one wishes to do so at all—is part of coming to terms with the past.[33] In this context, the StUG has enabled hundreds of thousands of individual confrontations with the past, along with countless discussions among families and friends about the benefits and drawbacks of the inspection of records, or about the content of the documents themselves. On the whole, as several surveys show, most people feel liberated from doubts and free to act from a more secure base of knowledge. Since 1991, more than 2.85 million applications for individual consultation have been made, along with about 483,000 applications for rehabilitation.[34]

Another important task of BStU is the so-called lustration (purge)—the screening of civil servants and public employees to identify any previous collaboration with the Stasi. BStU does not only provide the files or copies of files to concerned institutions and employers, it also gives advice on how to interpret the information. It does not judge or propose further procedures. Collaboration is a complex issue with many different degrees of liability; sometimes blackmailing, threats to loved ones, or other pressures are involved. A well-balanced judgment considering the critical details and nuances of every single case is necessary. This is the task of the employer, who must judge and decide a course of action in accordance to the degree and intensity of the collaboration.[35] During the last two decades, more than 1.76 million requests have been made for these special screenings.

The Stasi's unique archival legacy also offers a wide area of historical research and scholarship. However, as already mentioned, the conditions for access to the records differ from the normal archival process. On the one hand, they are more restricted because of the sensitive data they contain. On the other, access to documents about perpetrators has been made easier; there are no periods of restriction, and the real names of Stasi employees and informants

[33] See *Entscheidungen gegen das Schweigen. 15 Jahre Einsicht in die Stasi-Unterlagen*, ed. BStU (Berlin: BStU, 2007) and the reflections of Ash, *The File*, 194–201.

[34] As of March 2012. See further, *Zehnter Tätigkeitsbericht*, 50–72; Engelmann, "The Opening of the Stasi Records and Collective Memories," 333–38.

[35] Marianne Birthler, "Die BStU im Wandel der Rechtsprechung und der öffentlichen Diskurse in Ost- und Westdeutschland," in *Woran erinnern? Der Kommunismus in der deutschen Erinnerungskultur*, ed. Peter März and Hans-Joachim Veen (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006), 123–31.

can be released.[36] So far, scholars and journalists have handed in nearly twenty-five thousand requests, and such requests are increasing all the time (nearly fifteen hundred new requests last year).[37] Recent scholarship focuses more broadly on the interactions of the Stasi, the SED state, and society. Some studies offer interesting insights into East German everyday life and ordinary people's images and perceptions of the Stasi.[38] Other studies analyze the role of denunciation as a specific form of participation in the dictatorship, especially in comparison with the Third Reich's Gestapo. This comparative perspective not only sharpens the understanding of both the Third Reich and the GDR, but also identifies structural changes in the relationship between state and society.[39] Finally, interest continues in the HV A, Stasi's foreign intelligence department, one of the most successful intelligence services of the twentieth century, which cooperated closely with other Warsaw Pact agencies and the KGB.[40]

BStU not only releases documents to external researchers, it also maintains its own research division. Since 1992, this section has published more than 150 books and booklets, and nearly 800 articles and essays.[41] This research division is necessary because some files containing protected data are not yet available to the general research community. Furthermore, it works as a service unit for external scholars by producing useful handbooks offering general information about the Stasi apparatus. However, the research is not aimed merely at the mechanisms of power and repression. It is equally important to describe what day-to-day life was like under the conditions imposed by a dictatorship, and how some citizens became traitors and others refused to cooperate with the Stasi.

---

[36] See Polley, "StUG und deutsche Archivgesetze," 158–64; Bonitz, *Persönlichkeitsrechtsschutz im Stasi-Unterlagen-Gesetz.*

[37] As of March 2012.

[38] As examples, see Jens Gieseke, *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft. Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007) and Thomas Großbölting, ed., *Friedensstaat, Leseland, Sportnation? DDR-Legenden auf dem Prüfstand* (Berlin: Links, 2009).

[39] See Günther Heydemann and Heinrich Oberreuter, eds., *Diktaturen in Deutschland—Vergleichsaspekte. Strukturen, Institutionen und Verhaltensweisen* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2003); Horst Möller, "Diktatur und Demokratieforschung im 20. Jahrhundert," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 51 (2003): 29–50; Detlef Schmiechen-Ackermann, *Diktaturen im Vergleich* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002).

[40] Georg Herbstritt and Helmut Müller-Enbergs, eds., *Das Gesicht dem Westen zu. DDR-Spionage gegen die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2003); Georg Herbstritt, *Bundesbürger im Dienst der DDR-Spionage. Eine analytische Studie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007); Helmut Müller-Enbergs, "Markus Wolf versus United States of America. Die Amerika-Abteilung des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit," *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* (2010): 209–42; Kristie Macrakis et al*., eds., East German Foreign Intelligence: Myth, Reality and Controversy* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[41] As of March 2012; Zehnter *Tätigkeitsbericht*, 73–80. See the synopsis at http://www.bstu.bund.de under "Publikationen." BStU recently published a helpful encyclopedia about structure, history, methods, and high-ranking staff of the Stasi, see Roger Engelmann et al., eds., *Das MfS-Lexikon: Begriffe, Personen und Strukturen der Staatssicherheit der DDR* (Berlin: Links, 2011).

F I G U R E   1 3 . **The former Stasi's archive building in Berlin (photo: Anja Bohnhof, "Zu den Akten")**

The Stasi files reveal not only shame and treachery, but also moral courage and self-respect. Without these reports and stories, partly from the 1940s and 1950s, these times would be forgotten. In addition, the Stasi documents comprise an indispensable source of information on many other issues—sometimes even the only source.[42] In Berlin and its local branches, the BStU organizes hundreds of events annually, including exhibitions, readings, lectures, symposia, and film and sound screenings, to spread information about the Stasi's history, structure, methods, and manner of operation.[43] These events give audiences insight into the repression of the Stasi based on current research. Two decades

---

[42] Uta Stolle, "Traumhafte Quellen. Vom Nutzen der Stasi-Akten für die Geschichtsschreibung," *Deutschland-Archiv* 30 (1997): 209–21; Siegfried Suckut, "Die Bedeutung der Akten des Staatssicherheitsdienstes für die Erforschung der DDR-Geschichte," in *Aktenlage. Die Bedeutung der Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes für die Zeitgeschichtsforschung*, ed. Klaus-Dietmar Henke and Roger Engelmann (Berlin: Links, 1995), 195–206.

[43] Karsten Jedlitschka, "Stasi-Archiv Multimedial," *Archivar* 64 (2011): 310–12.

after German reunification, public interest is still alive and even growing. Public debate about the two German dictatorial regimes, the Third Reich and the GDR, is a staple of German political culture.

Such activities, requests, and research needs place a huge demand on the BStU archives and resources. In 2011, there were—on average—40,000 research inquiries per month, 23,500 requests for files, and 121,000 copies made of archival materials (i.e., more than 1.45 million copies per year!). Moreover, public interest in the BStU and its archives is very high. Every year an increasing number of visitors take guided archives tours. In 2008, 250 groups visited the archives; in 2009, 296 groups; and in 2010, 328 groups (3,895 visitors) received a tour through the Stasi's former central archives in Berlin. That is an increase of more than 10 percent per year.

Finally, an important international aspect must be mentioned. Communist dictatorship was the central, common experience of Eastern European countries in the second half of the twentieth century.[44] In most of these postcommunist countries are institutions similarly dedicated to coming to terms with the communist past. All of them were founded in the 1990s. The BStU continues to serve as an important role model for the founding, structuring, and legal standing of these secret police archives institutions, the "archives of repression."[45] In December 2008, institutions from seven countries (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Germany) formed a network to link their work and exchange practical experience. The aim of this network is to research the system of communist rule—and particularly that of communist secret-police forces—not just in relation to the individual countries involved, but in their international relationships.[46] The BStU also serves as a role model in a wider antidictatorial or anti-autocratic sense. Most recently, during the "Arab Spring" of 2011, Egyptians occupied the archives of President

---

[44] Timothy Snyder, "Diktaturen in Osteuropa: Regionalgeschichte oder europäisches Erbe?," in *Vergangenheit in der Gegenwart. Vom Umgang mit Diktaturerfahrungen in Ost- und Westeuropa*, ed. Thomas Großbölting and Dirk Hofmann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2008), 33–42.

[45] Danielson, "Privacy Rights and the Rights of Political Victims," 176.

[46] See Reiner Schiller-Dickhut and Bernd Rosenthal, eds., *The European Network of Official Authorities in Charge of the Secret-Police-Files. A Reader on Their Legal Foundations, Structures and Activities* (Berlin: BStU, 2009); Krzysztof Persak, ed., *A Handbook of the Communist Security Apparatus in East Central Europe 1944–1989* (Warsaw: Instytut Pamieci Narodowej, 2005); Dagmar Unverhau, *Lustration, Aktenöffnung, demokratischer Umbruch in Polen, Tschechien, der Slowakei und Ungarn* (Münster: LIT, 1999); Antonio Gonzalez Quintana et al., eds., *Archives of the Security Services of Former Repressive Regimes* (report prepared for UNESCO on behalf of the International Council of Archives, Paris, 1997).

Mubarak's secret police, then asked Germany to help on the basis of its experience and expertise.[47]

Conclusion

To sum up—what is so outstanding about the BStU? In one sense, it is the sheer number of papers and other documents created by an over-zealous apparatus intended to terrorize people. The Stasi's archival legacy challenges archivists to analyze and reveal the working methods of a secret police. Reconstructing shredded files breaks new ground both technically and archivally. In other areas as well, such as the enormous audiovisual legacy, BStU archives face singular challenges. The BStU is a unique institution resulting from the legacy of the Peaceful Revolution of 1989, and as such marks an important landmark in the history of archives management. It offers an extraordinary chance to disclose and analyze the archival legacy of the Stasi and, in so doing, serves as a significant role model not only in Eastern Europe, but also for the Arab world.

Since ancient times, archives have been highly valued. Greeks and Romans put them in safe places, sometimes even in temples. Medieval emperors stored their archives in their castles, sheltered by thick walls. Why did they do so? Because archives preserve important legal and historical documents—in sum, the knowledge of leadership. Archival holdings are an important cornerstone of power and influence. Therefore, after political breaks or revolutions, there are only two possibilities as to how to treat archives: keep them or destroy them. The first case would erase the old leadership and open the way for a new time of forgetting and forgiving. There are plenty examples of this path taken in history.[48] In the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the

[47] Birgit Svensson, "Sturm auf die Stasi-Zentrale—diesmal in Kairo," *Die Welt* 7, March 2011, 6; Michael Birnbaum, "An Unusual German Export to Egypt: How to Handle the Secret Police," *The Washington Post,* 28 March 2011; Frank Hornig, "Stasi unter Palmen. Wiederholt sich die Geschichte? Nach dem Sturm auf die Staatssicherheit in Kairo will die Berliner Stasi-Unterlagenbehörde den Ägyptern beim Sichern der Akten helfen," *Der Spiegel,* 4 April 2011, 36–38; Rainer Hermann, "Wider das Flüstern. Ägyptens Staatssicherheit soll kein Tabu mehr sein," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* 29 June 2011, 3; Erwin Kammholz, "Stasi-Unterlagenbehörde hilft Ägyptern bei Aufarbeitung," *Hamburger Abendblatt,* 11 August 2011, 3; Silke Mertins, "Dieselbe Schule! Die Stasiunterlagenbehörde wird zum Vorzeigeprojekt für das neue Ägypten und dessen Umgang mit Mubaraks Schergen," *Financial Times Deutschland,* 12 August 2011, 13.

[48] Winfried Schulze, "Wieviel Überlieferung braucht die Geschichte? Überlegungen zur Ordnung des Bewahrens," in *Digitale Archive? Ein neues Paradigma? Beiträge des 4. Archivwissenschaftlichen Kolloquiums der Archivschule Marburg,* ed. Andreas Metzing (Marburg: Archivschule Marburg, 2000), 15–35.

Thirty Years' War in 1648, a permanent forgetting and amnesty ("*pertua oblivio et amnestia*") was codified.[49]

The second way, keeping archives, provides the opportunity to study the old political system, to criticize—and to learn for the future. It provides the means to prosecute and punish crimes, to read and reflect on the archival heritage—in short, to come to terms with the past. Both options were discussed in 1989. Former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and several other politicians pleaded for the destruction of the Stasi files as a precondition of an all-embracing reconciliation. But the German Parliament decided otherwise: not to forget, but to keep alive the memory of its troubled past.[50] The GDR archives were rescued, among them—maybe most importantly—the Stasi archives. Germany invested in and is still spending a substantial amount of money on professional archival work and storage.[51] A special Stasi Records act was created. A unique archival legacy has been made accessible for the public.

Neither individuals nor societies can live without historical roots. One needs to know the past to learn for the future. Archives provide the historical sources to do so.[52] However, to commemorate simply the bright side of the past is only half of the story. There is an old German proverb: *Eine halbe Wahrheit ist eine ganze Lüge.* (A half truth is a total lie.) The German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe applied this wisdom on archival heritage and stated accurately: "Wenn ein Archiv Zeugnisse von der Art eines Zeitalters aufbewahren soll, so ist es zugleich seine Pflicht, auch dessen Unarten zu verewigen."[53] ("Archives have to keep not only the pleasant aspects of an age, but also the unpleasant.") In that respect, dealing with the Stasi past and its archival legacy is an indispensable responsibility.[54] Germany cannot be proud of the successes, efforts, and achieve-

---

[49] Instrumentum Pacis Osnabrugensis of 24 October 1648, Art. 2, quoted in Arno Buschmann, *Kaiser und Reich. Verfassungsgeschichte des Heiligen Römischen Reiches Deutscher Nation vom Beginn des 12. Jahrhunderts bis zum Jahre 1806 in Dokumenten* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1994), 17. See further, the sophisticated analysis of Christian Meier, *Das Gebot zu vergessen und die Unabweisbarkeit des Erinnerns. Vom öffentlichen Umgang mit schlimmer Vergangenheit* (Munich: Siedler, 2010).

[50] See Engelmann, "Der Weg zum Stasi-Unterlagen-Gesetz"; Schumann, *Vernichten oder Offenlegen?*

[51] See Karsten Jedlitschka, "Sichtungen. Die DDR in den Archiven," in *Zu den Akten,* ed. Anja Bohnhof (Potsdam: Hesperus, 2011), 3–6.

[52] Aleida Assmann, "Archive im Wandel der Mediengeschichte," in *Archivologie. Theorien des Archivs in Philosophie, Medien und Künsten,* ed. Knut Ebeling and Stephan Günzel (Berlin: Kadmos, 2009), 165–75; Anja Horstmann and Vanina Kopp, eds., *Archiv—Macht—Wissen. Organisation und Konstruktion von Wissen und Wirklichkeit in Archiven* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2010).

[53] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Weimarer Ausgabe,* part 1, vol. 40 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1901), 196. See also Willy Flach, "Goethes literarisches Archiv," in *Archivar und Historiker. Studien zur Archiv- und Geschichtswissenschaft. Zum 65. Geburtstag von Heinrich Otto Meisner* (Berlin: Rütten and Loening, 1956), 45–71, quotation 55.

[54] Marianne Birthler, "Die Bedeutung der BStU für die politische Kultur in Deutschland," in *Aufarbeitung totalitärer Erfahrungen und politische Kultur. Die Bedeutung der Aufarbeitung des SED-Unrechts für das Rechts- und Werteverständnis im wiedervereinigten Deutschland,* ed. Hendrik Hansen and Hans-Joachim Veen (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 2009), 145–53.

ments of its reunified self over the last two decades without taking an intense look at the dark side of its recent past. Coming to terms with the past is of enormous importance for a nation's identity as it moves toward being a free and democratic society. Two decades after the Berlin Wall came down, the Stasi files and the BStU continue to be a source of controversy and intensive public debates.[55] By keeping the discussion alive and helping to come to terms with the past, BStU serves as a school of democracy. It shows very strikingly the power of archives serving the public good—as a bulwark against social amnesia.[56]

---

[55] For the debate about the BStU, see Martin Sabrow et al., eds., *Wohin treibt die DDR-Erinnerung? Dokumentation einer Debatte* (Bonn: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007); Roger Engelmann, "Die herbeigeschriebene Legitimationskrise. Anatomie einer Kampagne gegen die Stasi-Unterlagen-Behörde," *Deutschland-Archiv* 40 (2007): 1071–78; Carolin Bossack, "Die Stasi-Unterlagen-Behörde. Eine Sonderinstitution, deren Zeit noch nicht abgelaufen ist," *Horch und Guck* 17 (2008): 64–66; Lars Normann, "BStU—Geschichte, Bestand und Zukunft," *Deutschland-Archiv* 43 (2010): 900–906.

[56] Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009), 237–78. See further, Elizabeth Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are," *The American Archivist* 63 (Spring/Summer 2000): 126–51; Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives," *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 131–41; Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 1–19; Hartmut Weber, "Die Rolle der Archive bei der Aufarbeitung der totalitären Diktaturen," in *Geschichtswissenschaft und Zeiterkenntnis,* ed. Klaus Hildebrand et al. (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008), 542–53; Horst Möller, "Die zeithistorische Erinnerung und die Archive," in *Öffnen, Erhalten und Sichern von Archivgut in Zeiten des Umbruchs,* ed. Angelika Menne-Haritz and Rainer Hofmann (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2010), 5–11; Trudy Huskamp Peterson, "Archives Against Amnesia," *Politorbis. Zeitschrift zur Aussenpolitik* 50 (2010): 3, 123–30; Elena S. Danielson, *The Ethical Archivist* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2010).