

Surviving Surveillance

East German activists and the Stasi



As an activist or campaigner in Britain it's hard to ignore surveillance and harassment from state and private security services – not to mention the the effect it is having on our work and our lives. This text takes a short look at the experiences of activists in East Germany (GDR) dealing with informants and infiltration before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Although this may seem like ancient history, grassroots activists in the GDR were politically and practically very close to us in Britain today, despite being in a significantly different social and political system. We've tried to introduce and summarise points that are both interesting and useful to those facing infiltration and spying in Britain, but we also recommend you look at some of the resources listed at the end for more up to date information that has been written for the current situation in Britain.

The invasive spying and disorientation tactics used by the East German secret police (**Stasi**) meant there were significantly fewer possibilities for civil disobedience and direct action than we have, nevertheless activists in East Germany managed to start off a grassroots revolution in 1989. Their experiences are worth looking at to see how they managed to survive surveillance and repression – not least because it is clear that the British police and private security have started to make use of the Stasi's toolkit.

This text is based on interviews with East German activists, and deals mainly with their experiences, even though many other sections of East German society were also subject to repression by the secret police. Those familiar with how police spies have been used in Britain may recognise the tactics used by both secret police and GDR activists.

East Germany and the Stasi

Between 1945 and 1990 Germany was divided in two – **West Germany**, integrated into NATO and western markets, and **East Germany** (*German Democratic Republic: GDR*), in the Soviet dominated Eastern Bloc. The **Stasi** was the East German secret police, and that country had the highest proportion of informants and secret police in history: 1 in 60 people were involved by 1989.

East German opposition and activism

Because non-state organisations were prohibited, networking and co-ordination between activists in the GDR was informal, and feels familiar to those involved in grassroots activism and campaigns here in Britain: independent groups and networks stayed in contact through newsletters and exchange of campaign materials (nowadays in the UK this is mostly done via the internet), and there was a mix of local and regionally co-ordinated covert and open actions.

Activists in the GDR also campaigned on issues that are familiar to us in Britain today: anti-nuclear and peace, challenging economic paradigms of growth and consumption at any cost; resistance to an undemocratic state and its activities; propagating and practising sustainable choices versus exploitation of environment and animals. There was a strong emphasis on DIY culture with egalitarian, equitable principles – politically most activists in the GDR self-defined as socialist or anarchist.

The Stasi and Zersetzung

After the East German popular uprising in June 1953 (suppressed by Soviet troops) the government gave the Stasi the task of systematic surveillance and prevention of unrest in the population. Initially this took the form of brutal physical repression: imprisonment and physical abuse (including torture) by police and secret police. But this changed during the 1970s when the GDR became more interested in gaining a positive international image and the repression of activists became more subtle. The Stasi redefined the military term **Zersetzung** (*attrition* or *corrosion*), to name their harassment tactics: the aim was to disrupt the working of groups and the lives of individuals to such a degree that their activism became ineffective, or more preferably, ceased altogether.

The aim of the *Zersetzung* was to 'switch off' the group by rendering it ineffective, with an interim goal of hindering any positive media or public exposure. The usual ways to switch groups off were to:

- **create conflict between members** – particularly useful subjects for sowing discord were those of a philosophical or political nature, money and sexual relations;
- **hinder and sabotage activities** by one or more infiltrators, who would agree to do tasks, but not get round to doing them, lose materials and equipment, repeatedly make suggestions for changes and edits of materials, attempt to divert the group into more harmless activities etc;
- **isolate the groups** from other activists, eg by spreading rumours regarding unacceptable behaviour and political views etc.

The choice of tactics was based on psychological profiling and intelligence about the group members, particularly: who plays what role, who fulfils what kind of task; what are relationships within the group like, who hangs out with whom.

Informants (IM: *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*) were the usual way to gain information on a group and were also used to implement the plans to incapacitate a group and sabotage its activities. In activist circles the informants were almost never Stasi or police officers, but were usually existing members of the groups who had been pressured, persuaded or blackmailed into helping the Stasi; or a suitable outsider who would try to infiltrate and become trusted by the group (like here in Britain, most activists groups in the GDR welcomed new members).

As in the case of groups, the *Zersetzung* of individuals had the aim of ‘switching off’ that person’s efficacy by undermining their confidence and their belief in the value of their activities. The Stasi did not usually care whether an individual was switched off through disillusionment, fear, burn-out or mental illness: all outcomes were acceptable, and people’s mental health and social standing during or after an operation were of no interest to the officers involved.

The *Zersetzung* of individuals was usually carried out through systematically undermining the quality of life of the target (both socially and in the workplace) with the intention of simply destroying the confidence of the target. The tactics used took various forms, such as spreading slanderous rumours, causing trouble at work etc. Rumours and information (such as about unacceptable political viewpoints, inappropriate behaviour, the possibility they may be an informant etc) that were passed on to bosses and social circles might be based on true facts, but were often plausible untruths that were hard or impossible to refute.

The first stage of *Zersetzung* was an evaluation of all state held data and information, eg medical records, school reports, police records, intelligence reports, searches of target’s residence. At this point they were looking for any weak points (social, emotional or physical) that could be used as a way to put pressure on the target, eg extra-marital affairs, criminal records, alcoholism, drug use, differences between the target and their group (eg age, class, clothing styles) that could be used to socially isolate them.

How did the Stasi persuade people to become informants?

- Appeals to patriotism
- Cash or material reward
- Blackmail
- Offers of immunity from threatened prosecution
- Making the mission sound like an exciting adventure

Worrying about informants

The Stasi made little secret of the fact that they used informants, and in fact deliberately helped spread rumours about informants. This was the cheapest and most effective way to incapacitate individuals and groups.

After this a *Zersetzung* strategy was drawn up: What was the specific aim? What tactics should be used to exploit the target’s personal situation and character traits? What was the timescale?

The next stage was often to supplement covert surveillance with overt observation in order to communicate to the target that they were of interest to the Stasi and to create a sense of insecurity and paranoia. Tactics included questioning, repeated stop and searches, strange noises on telephone lines, conspicuous visits to the workplace so that bosses and colleagues were aware of the police interest etc.

The final stages entailed psychological and physical harassment: moving things around at home (*one morning the alarm clock goes off at 5am instead of 7am, and the socks are in the wrong drawer, there’s no coffee left...*); damage to bikes and vehicles (eg slashing tyres); the spreading of rumours as mentioned above; ordering goods in subject’s name etc.

Families were often used as leverage against activists at this stage – either as a method of blackmail (family members were sometimes subject to oppression as a way of putting indirect pressure on the activist), or persuasion (“your daughter will land in deep trouble if she remains involved in that group, can’t you make her see sense? It’s her career at stake...”). Physical harassment often included repeated arrests, physical attacks on the street (eg by plain clothes officers), and abuse and assault could be incited by the rumours that had been spread (eg bullying at work, avoidance by neighbours).

How effective was the Stasi?

1) Paralysing individuals and groups

Although *Zersetzung* was based on strategic analysis of the situation, and the Stasi had a fearsome reputation for well organised surveillance and repression, we know from comparing personal accounts and Stasi files that the *Zersetzung* was actually often poorly planned and prepared: on the one hand the Stasi often overestimated their own organisational capabilities and ability to analyse and understand the groups they were targeting; on the other hand they usually underestimated the activists’ own abilities to read the situation, and to communicate with each other – for example an attempt to isolate a group by spreading false rumours would fail if members of that group had regular social interaction with people in other groups.

A major factor is that the militarily organised Stasi simply couldn’t understand how many activist groups functioned without leaders and hierarchies. They often mistook



informal hierarchies (caused for example by differences in empowerment levels or dominant behaviour patterns) to be real hierarchies – they would target those who talked the most, or took on the most tasks, and didn't realise that even if these individuals were 'switched off', the rest of the group could still manage to function and wouldn't necessarily fall apart.

The dedication of groups was also often underestimated – even if an informant successfully sabotaged a group's activities, the group would rarely be completely disheartened, but would try all the harder to achieve their goals.

The tactics of *Zersetzung* had a significant control function, if you were engaged in (or merely suspected of) activities that the Stasi didn't like then this was a way to punish you – rather like the extra-judicial punishment exercised by the police in Britain (eg the threat of ASBOs, severe bail conditions, the requirement to repeatedly answer bail).

The human cost of *Zersetzung* is hard to quantify – many GDR activists are still suffering from burnout, trauma and chronic mental health issues as a result of being targeted: on an individual level the Stasi could be frighteningly effective.

2) Gathering and using intelligence

Informants weren't just used to sabotage group activities and implement *Zersetzung* plans, but also to gain intelligence on individuals and groups (around 160km worth of Stasi archives survived the end of the GDR). Most intelligence was used to evaluate relationships and activities (which then led to an extension of intelligence gathering to previously untargeted individuals and groups), and as a basis for planning *Zersetzung* operations. Obviously plans for actions and activities were also reported, but these were acted upon only in rare and serious cases – if intelligence was used to disrupt the activities in any obvious way then suspicion might be drawn to the informant.

Intelligence from surveillance and the use of informants was rarely used to actually gain evidence for a prosecution – the Stasi desperately needed the huge amount of information it was processing in order to justify its own existence (along with the salaries and expenses of its officers and staff). If anything, this made the Stasi more dangerous to activists – the Stasi's dependency on gathering intelligence and mounting operations made the surveillance, *Zersetzung* and sabotage more likely to happen, along with the associated human cost.

Informants were regularly found out – mostly because of poor preparation (at one infamous meeting, several rather conspicuous figures all introduced themselves with the same name), and chance (eg groups who came across evidence that an informant was passing information to the Stasi). But it is significant that most informants were only discovered after 1989 when the Stasi files were opened.



Dealing with Zersetzung

Many people succumbed to pressure from the Stasi and other security forces, often because of mental health difficulties (brought about by the pressure) or through a process that was commonly called 'inner migration': giving up political and social beliefs, following the path of least resistance and ceasing oppositional activity.

On the other hand resistance to *Zersetzung* was remarkably commonplace, and activists found ways to remain both healthy and active. When East German activists talk today about how they managed to continue their activism, the same points come up again and again, these are summarised below.

Support from friends and other activists was essential – a circle of close friends who shared an understanding of the political and policing situation was probably the most effective way to counter the Stasi. With these friends activists could talk openly about fears, suspicions and needs – they could work out ways of dealing with the pressure. They spent time with these friends doing non-activism related activities which helped to build trust in the group. This helped them to know that if things got bad for them, they could both trust their friends, and be trusted by them, and would be there if help and support was needed. As a group they would make plans for possible situations – for example, who would take care of the children in case of arrest or even imprisonment, or who could provide a 'safe house' if somebody was being shadowed and needed a break.

On a wider level the **solidarity between groups** was an important factor in their survival and freedom to remain active: those groups that had strong relationships with others around the country were generally subject to less repression. In later years, particularly in East Berlin, even when repression happened, widespread solidarity actions and concerted efforts to gain publicity led to quick results (arrested or imprisoned individuals released, the work of the group allowed to resume etc). On the other hand, those groups that weren't so well networked (usually those in small towns and rural areas where they might be the only active group) were easy pickings for the Stasi – at times whole regions of the country were 'cleansed' of grassroots activism.

Groups openly discussed the possibility of surveillance and intervention. The groups would aim to work out what oppression measures they might be subject to (currently and in future) and think of ways to deal with these. The hard bit was not to get lost in paranoia (particularly since there was a good chance that the group already had an informant present!), nor to be naïve or ignorant about the

possibilities, but to find a middle ground of sensible measures that would, if needed, help, while not getting bogged down in extensive security measures that would just hinder the work of the group.

Part of working out the level of threat from the Stasi, and how to deal with it, was to consider the way the group worked, and how open the group was to newcomers. It is tempting to think that preparing and carrying out actions in the utmost secrecy would be the best defence against an opponent like the Stasi, but of the groups we know about which worked covertly in the GDR, all were subject to brutal *Zersetzung* measures, while those that worked openly were often subject 'only' to surveillance and sabotage by informants, but could nevertheless carry on their activities to a greater or lesser extent. When open groups were subject to extraordinary repression levels, they were in a good position to mobilise support from other groups and interest from West German media. (It's difficult to draw conclusions though – generally only those from open groups are willing to speak of their experiences, and any covert group that might have survived would be, by definition, hard to find out about.) Working openly also did not preclude the need to work secretly at times, particularly when planning an action or dealing with sensitive issues, and steps would be taken to avoid surveillance.

If a group identified an individual as a possible informant they might have decided not take any obvious immediate action. The immediate reaction would be to assess whether there might be any merit in the suspicions rather than to spread any rumours. The usual way of dealing with the situation would be for a few trusted individuals to discreetly research the suspect. Backgrounds would be checked (are there any family members? Do they exist? Has anyone else from the group spoken to them? What about friendships outside the group? Did the suspect actually work where they said they did? Are they familiar with the town they say they grew up in etc) This worked well enough for informants who had been provided with a cover story and infiltrated into the group by the Stasi, but didn't provide clear results if the informant was a 'real' person who had been turned.

By making notes of behaviour patterns and movements of a suspect the group might think they were finding evidence of Stasi involvement, but equally, they might be framing an innocent individual. Discovering reports to handling officers would be a clear sign, but if an individual were guilty of losing materials and not getting round to completing agreed tasks, it could not be simply assumed that they were an informant or saboteur – no matter how regularly it might happen! In other words, groups needed to be extremely careful when they thought they might have discovered an informant – it was all too easy to start a witch hunt against innocents, something that would easily paralyse groups and individuals and play right into the hands of the Stasi.

Conclusion

It is easy to get lost in analysing the techniques the Stasi used, and the more you look into it, the more frightening it gets. But we feel there are perhaps three main lessons that we can learn from the experiences of these activists in the GDR:

- Many of the tactics used by the Stasi for intelligence gathering and *Zersetzung* are in use by private and state security services (including the police). Being aware of these tactics helps us to recognise when they are being used on us, and how we can best counter them.
- Solidarity and trust between individuals and groups provides a support network which helps us to remain active and healthy.
- Suspicion about possible informants and spies shouldn't be ignored, but acted upon. However spreading rumours harms individuals and groups and should be avoided unless and until suspicions have been confirmed.

Finally, it's worth mentioning that, in our assessment, the grassroots opposition movements made the biggest contribution to the revolution that started in East Germany in autumn 1989 – despite the horrifying levels of repression and surveillance that they had faced for decades. Quite simply, the Stasi failed to predict the events of that year, and once things had started their *Zersetzung* tactics became ineffective.

Links + Further Reading

Activist Security Collective: www.activistsecurity.org – includes a general guide on security issues, and what to do if you think you may have an infiltrator or informer in your group.

Activist Trauma Support: www.activist-trauma.net – support group for those injured or suffering from mental health issues due to activism.

Campaign Opposing Police Surveillance: www.campaignopposingpolicesurveillance.com – blog on police surveillance in the UK.

Counselling for Social Change: www.counsellingforsocialchange.org.uk – emotional support to people working to make a difference.

NetPol: www.netpol.org – monitor public order, protest and street policing.

Police Spies Out of Lives:
www.policespiesoutoflives.org.uk – Support group for women's legal action against undercover policing.

Wikipedia also has many articles on the Stasi and East German activism.

