Power and Vulnerability: Secrecy, Social Relationships, and the East German Stasi
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The telling of jokes and, moreover, political jokes, was common practice in socialist societies, and no less so in my family.1 My two older brothers enjoyed sharing witty quips, whether concerning a special brand of household cleaner or a head of state’s fate when slipping off a springboard with their primary-school-aged sister. The joke goes that the springboard was magic and would fill the basin below with whatever substance the head of state requested before jumping in. But while Gorbachev had successfully asked for caviar and Reagan for champagne, Honecker slips awkwardly and cries out ‘shiiiiit’ in surprise. The reader can imagine the result. On one such occasion of joke-sharing, I remember my brothers warning me not to tell such jokes too liberally. There were men, they said, who would secretly listen, and I might get into trouble if they heard me. To the 7-year-old sister, the idea of middle-aged men in business suits lurking behind trees to listen to children’s conversations, as I imagined it, seemed rather silly.

The East German secret police, the MfS – or Stasi in popular parlance – has been described as an “all-powerful and all-knowing apparatus” that aimed for total control of the East German population.2 It was one of the largest secret police forces in the former eastern bloc in comparison to population size.3 It consisted of 40,000 to 50,000


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Secrecy, Spectacle, and Power

full-time personnel and an extensive network of ‘inofficial employees’ – ordinary citizens who were informing on others (180,000 individuals in the 1980s).4 The now infamous ‘Stasi-files’ contain a host of information about individuals and groups that had become targets of MfS operations, consisting of surveillance reports, copies of mail, taped phone conversations, photographs, protocols of covert house searches, and similar items. The information was used, among other purposes, to determine what kinds of approaches would be most effective to intimidate individuals or to recruit them.

That a secret police was carrying out surveillance was widely known. Many people assumed that the Stasi was compiling ‘a file’ on them, and were aware of the dangerous consequences of attracting too much attention. Reflection on the risks of certain actions included much speculation as to which colleague or neighbor might be an informer. Yet much about the MfS remained shrouded in mystery through the tight web of secrecy which it used to both cover and harbor its powers. Thus, while people were aware of the potential dangers of criticizing government, rejecting requests from authorities (such as to join the party), voicing criticism of the ruling party or of being an active Christian, they did not know what exactly the outcome of any of these actions might be. This uncertainty was reinforced by the arbitrariness of enforcements: some people engaged in seemingly ‘risky’ activities and never experienced any problems, while others became the targets of Stasi operations for seemingly no reason at all. MfS surveillance and state control were a ‘public secret’ in Taussig’s sense; they were generally known but impossible to articulate in their specificities.5

Secrecy and relationships

Usually seen as negative, Simmel’s and Durkheim’s work re-evaluated secrecy for anthropology as productive, and value-free, forces that constitute society and culture.9 In this view, practices of concealment and revelation stand in productive tension, since secrets only possess power as long as they are known to be a secret, and surveillance thus enabled the MfS to gain considerable power over East German society.6 When employed against targeted individuals, they intertwined further with strategies of socially isolating these individuals through Zersetzung, the ‘dissolution’ of their friendship and family ties.7 At the same time, however, the mobilization of relationships in the family or at work by sharing information about being recruited by the Stasi, for example, appears to have occasionally empowered some people against the otherwise “all-powerful and all-knowing apparatus,” as the discussion below will show. This article will thus explore the dynamic interrelation of social isolation and relationships, on the one hand, and secrecy and the revelation (of secrecy) on the other. As the discussion will show, more often than not, this dynamic fueled the Stasi’s power, but at other – although rare – occasions, it caused the secret police to be vulnerable.8

The use of elaborate techniques of secrecy

6 Glaeser explores how this attempt at totalized information gathering against the backdrop of the inflexible truth-discourse of socialist ideology created the conditions for the state’s seeming inability to respond to fast-paced change in 1989. Andreas Glaeser, Political Epistemics: The Secret Police, the Opposition, and the End of East German Socialism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
7 Tactics of individualization were (and are) also used by other secret police organizations; see, for example, Cristina Vatulescu, Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
8 The article is based on two periods of fieldwork in eastern Germany in 2004 and 2007–2008, both of which were funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK (RES0061-23-0035). All names of informants are pseudonyms.
and they generate responses in terms of rumors and speculation. At the threshold between the sacred and the profane, according to Durkheim, elaborate rituals of the revelation of secrets, rather than their content, produce meaning and re-constitute social order. Simmel’s classic essay also focuses on moments of revelation, but in relation to membership of secret societies to explore questions of trust, risk, inclusion, and exclusion. Trust is required when individuals are initiated into a tight circle of those in the know, as they now gain power vis-à-vis the group. Here, revelation and initiation strengthen social bonds between members of the secret society, although the bearing of secrets, of knowledge that cannot be shared, itself is an isolating and individualizing force, according to Simmel’s observations.

The arguments above chime with some commonly held assumptions about life in socialist societies. Given political oppression and violence, some scholars have argued that socialist subjects used dissimulation – that is, they put on ‘false appearances’ in public to avoid attracting the secret police’s attention. If we believe that life was fraud with dangers, it makes sense to assume that the social ties people did maintain became particularly valuable and strong. The notion of East Germany as a ‘niche society’ speaks to such views. Coined by journalist and politician Günther Gauss, the phrase is now commonly used in public discourse to describe a society marked by an apolitical private sphere in which citizens expressed creativity and criticism away from an interfering state. Niches were the weekends spent in the allotment, or barbeques with friends and family, which were sustained by tight-knit social networks. Such simplistic views of socialist societies as shaped entirely by the state’s oppressive force, leading to a stark separation between public and private, have been challenged by anthropological works.

Although it is undoubted that life in socialist states bore risks, these works show that relationships were also highly important. In many socialist societies and their shortage economies, for example, people depended on social networks to exchange rare goods and services. Moreover, Dunn and others have shown that notions of the person in socialist societies did not see people as autonomous individuals, but, rather, as socially embedded. That social relationships were also culturally valued in East Germany became apparent after reunification, when, for example, many people explained that what they missed most was taking time for and supporting one another through sharing labor and resources.

Isolation in secrecy

Like the Romanian Securitate, the MfS also mobilized understandings of this importance of relationships in its work. In East Germany, this applied particularly to techniques of Zersetzung, as the Stasi called it: attempts to dissolve individuals’ social networks, leaving them socially isolated. The specific strategies used were informed by knowledge garnered from surveillance of what would be most effective for an individual. For dissident groups, it often involved the use of misinformation to spread rumors that the target might be collaborating with the MfS. This could be achieved by calling individuals to Stasi offices for meetings and disseminating photographic evidence of the visit, or by MfS officers meeting such individuals in public and feigning familiarity. Misinformation against politically active pastors

13 Verdery, Secrets and Truths.
15 Pingel-Schliemann, “Sie haben mich zum Verräter gemacht”. 
Secrecy, Spectacle, and Power

of the German Lutheran church usually concerned questions of decency and morality. Rumors might be spread that the local pastor entertained extramarital affairs, or doctored photographs showing the individual in compromising situations (engaged in practices of nudity, homosexual activities, etc.) might be disseminated. The most powerful techniques of *Zersetzung* involved misinformation, or rather ‘fictitious secrets’, directly about individuals’ interpersonal relationships. In the case of Herr Schmidt, for example, a female friend received letters from a ‘concerned neighbor’, a *Stasi* informer, portraying Schmidt as a womanizing bachelor to persuade her to break off contact. One of the allegations concerned this friend’s former fiancé. This positioning combined compromising misinformation with powerful emotions of previous betrayals to add persuasive force to the argument that Schmidt was not to be trusted. *Zersetzung*, moreover, aimed to be exhaustive: it was applied to circles of friends, the workplace, and family. The result was that individuals became ‘individualized’; they would be left with as few close and trustworthy contacts as the MfS could achieve, preferably without any from their perspective. Another informant explained that she found a note in her files saying that now that she and her husband had been discredited among their friends, their place of work was to be targeted next.

Such experiences of utter exclusion, of finding that acquaintances suddenly considered you untrustworthy, unworthy, if not dangerous to be with, on the basis of rumors you knew to be untrue, were deeply upsetting. Furthermore, they disabled agency. Such high levels of social exclusion meant the loss of sounding boards, of support structures, of all those short and long everyday conversations with others that people used to make sense of their environment and experiences. In such an individualized position, further MfS techniques of misinformation and intimidation gained greater power, such as semi-overt surveillance when the observing officer ‘revealed’ himself behind a lamppost as ‘secretly’ filming your flat. The *Stasi* also used staged events to, for example, introduce new social contacts into the increasingly ‘dissolved’ social network. Herr Schmidt experienced such a moment when he was accused of assaulting a woman, a *Stasi* informer who came to the police department to confront him, although he had been nowhere near the scene of the crime, nor the woman, when the crime was said to have taken place. The woman later visited him at home to apologize for the ‘false accusation’, replacing one lie with another, in an (unsuccessful) attempt to initiate a relationship with Schmidt. Only when reading his files in the 1990s was Schmidt able to understand this bizarre series of events. In these kinds of situations, the *Stasi*’s use of fictitious secrets and of half-revelation of the public secret, of the truth (of surveillance) that we “know not to know”, as Taussig writes, created an unsettling and potentially disabling ambiguity. It arose from the tension between what was known yet could not be explained, and what could not be known. In this manner, secrecy, combined with misinformation, could threaten individuals’ very ability to make sense, thereby strengthening the *Stasi*’s powers.

MfS secrecy also extended to relations with collaborators. Inofficial employees (IM), worked with just one ‘guidance officer’, received only limited information, and were never told who or what the target of their activities was. Individual IMs’ reports only took on meaning in connection with the reports of others, to which only the responsible MfS officers had access, together completing the jigsaw of any one operational process. Moreover, informers were sworn to secrecy from their very first encounter with the *Stasi*. Once they agreed to collaborate, they took the ‘Chekist Oath’,

16 Ibid.  
17 I thank Cristina Vatulescu for this phrase.  
Secrecy, Spectacle, and Power

swearing loyalty to the MfS and lifelong silence. In this manner, the secret of collaboration also “individualized” informants vis-à-vis their friends and family, potentially strengthening, if we follow Simmel further, their bond to the MfS officer, the one person with whom they shared their knowledge.\(^2^2\) To what degree the latter is true depended on individual circumstances.\(^2^3\) Where individuals were pressurized into collaboration, for example, the joined bearing of the secret was unlikely to have led to a trusting relationship. Verdery’s research on the Securitate nevertheless shows that “the injunction to silence displaced informers’ allegiances away from their own network and toward their relationship to their handler”, even if informers themselves greatly disliked their new affiliation with the secret police.\(^2^4\)

Secrecy is at its most productive in moments of revelation and renewed concealment, as Jones reminds us.\(^2^5\) The moment of initiation into secret groups is also where such groups are at their most vulnerable.\(^2^6\) This is clear in Schmidt’s life story, when he describes his network’s dissident activities, which caused him to become a target of the MfS, and the anxiety surrounding new members. The constant question of whether they could be trusted was raised, even for the West German journalist who was going to help with printing leaflets. This vulnerability at the moment at which the secret group reveals its existence also appears to have affected the MfS. Stories of people refusing to collaborate have rarely made it into public discourse in post-unification Germany, and I stumbled over them rather unexpectedly during research.\(^2^7\) Given the small number of cases that

22 Simmel, “The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies.”
24 Verdery, Secrets and Truths, 179.
26 Simmel, “The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies.”
27 See, for example, Marco Hecht and Gerald Praschl, Ich habe ‘NEIN!’ gesagt. Über Zivilcourage in der DDR (Werder/ Havel: Homilius, 2002).

I discovered by serendipity rather than design, I cannot say how widespread such experiences were. Striking is that all three stories have one point in common: the rejection of secrecy’s individualizing force, which I explore below.

**Rejecting secrecy by mobilizing social relationships**

Matthias Neumann, a Christian who was then a student of physics, was first approached at university.\(^2^8\) An inconspicuous-looking young man flicking an ID card identifying himself as MfS asked to have a chat with Neumann, in the café by the monastery, next week. Neumann had suspected that he might be under surveillance, given his Christian background and attempts to access Western magazines on astronomy, but was confounded by the request for ‘a chat over coffee’. Although he had been told to keep this quiet, he soon told a friend. The meeting itself was a nervous time for him, but the Stasi officers – there were now two of them – just engaged in small talk. He was asked for a second meeting, this time in a nearby flat so they would be unobserved. Neumann entrusted a friend with this information, and wrote up some notes, to which he added a postcard he had bought at the monastery. At the second meeting, the officers’ intentions become clearer. They suggested that Neumann might be threatened by Western secret services as and when he traveled abroad for conferences – that was a possibility because he was a promising student. The officers said that only the MfS would be able to protect him then. Neumann was quick to respond that he did not feel able to sign up for long-term collaboration. This raised eyebrows, but the recruitment attempt was averted and Neumann deemed an unsuitable candidate. In this story Neumann used two tactics to safeguard himself from the grasp of the Stasi that simultaneously worked against secrecy’s individualizing powers. He took notes of the discussions in a journal to remind himself of what was going on, and for

28 Research for the project in 2007–2008 was conducted by myself as Principal Investigator, and by Research Associate Dr. Sabine Kittel, who conducted the majority of the life-story interviews.
Secrecy, Spectacle, and Power

others to find should he disappear. He also spoke with friends, enlisting them as ‘witnesses’ and moral sounding boards. When interviewer Sabine asked Neumann why he told a friend straight away, he explained that he could not foresee what kind of pressure might be put on him. If a friend knew, he could later ask Neumann what had happened, creating an accountability loop.

Telling others was also important for Klaus Steinberger, a German Democratic Republic-trained journalist, when he was approached by the MfS in 1980. At this point, Steinberger had been accepted at university to study journalism and held a placement at the local editorial office. Like all journalists, he was a member of the ruling party. He described how the doorbell rang one afternoon and two gentlemen identified themselves clearly and politely as ‘Ministry of State Security’. In Steinberg’s case, they were upfront about their intention, which was to recruit him as a full-time employee: “Had he ever thought about a career change?” Disinclined to accept given that he had only just managed to break into his dream profession, Steinberg was also left perplexed. Despite instruction not to mention this, he confided in his wife as soon as she came home. At this moment, the MfS’s veil of mystery worked against it: his wife doubted that this was the Stasi. The attempt was too overt for them. She guessed that it was a recruitment attempt by the West German secret service instead. To gain clarity, Steinberg spoke with his line manager at the newspaper. The editor in chief, who sat on the regional party committee together with the region’s MfS director, promised to enquire. The encounter was confirmed as an approach by the MfS, although the poaching of party personnel, which included journalists, was forbidden. For Steinberg, it was clearly the mobilization of his social ties, through the breaking of secrecy, which allowed him to withstand the Stasi’s force. He was put through a final meeting, hauled into a car, and subjected to a tirade of threats, but there were no further and no serious consequences, as he pointed out in the interview.

The final story suggests that even the verbal invocation of interpersonal relationships can be empowering. My father occasionally tells of his direct encounter with the secret police when he was studying theology. A refugee from eastern Prussia and budding pastor, he was highly critical of the East German state. Collaboration with the MfS was thus never an option for him. He made his move when the officer explained that of course he would need to keep quiet about their relationship. Father, as his student-self, asked to confirm: “I cannot tell anyone?” “No one at all,” was the response. And father retorted: “Unfortunately, it is not possible then. I’d have to tell my mother, you see, we share everything.” So goes the punchline of what has become a family anecdote.

It would be difficult to argue in the case of the East German secret police that secrecy, as a force that constitutes culture and society as Simmel and Durkheim see it, is value-free. In cases of oppression, such as in East Germany, we cannot escape its destructive powers. But while strategies of not just secrecy, but of the ambiguity derived from the tensions between what was known and what could not be known, conferred considerable power over society to the MfS, they also created vulnerabilities. The MfS was able to weaken and ultimately control individuals through a combination of revelation and concealment; for example, in semi-overt surveillance, with the individualizing forces of Zersetzung – which were also based in revelation, albeit fictitious revelation – and concealment through the use of misinformation to instigate rumors. Conversely, social relationships served as resources for individuals to assert agency. This occurred at least during moments when the MfS was the party in

29 Also Taussig, Defacement.
need, if only of recruits, and the otherwise highly asymmetrical relationship between MfS officers and citizens was levelled through ‘true’ revelation, if only ever so slightly. Mobilizing social ties in this moment of potential initiation meant taking action against the individualization and social exclusion, which the MfS sought, through the rejection of secrecy. These rare moments of successfully refusing the Stasi and its secret tactics thus suggest that social relationships can bestow power on individuals as much as their loss can be disabling and traumatizing.