

The Stasi and the nature of surveillance

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Throughout the GDR, the Stasi performed surveillance and intervened when it seemed necessary in order to support the ruling dictatorship and act to prevent that which the party wanted to (Jarausch 2014). The Stasi operated until the recent reunification of Germany. The example of the Stasi might, therefore, be a rather useful one in the consideration of surveillance and the widespread implications that it has. The identification of various characteristics of surveillance through their visibility in East Germany paints a picture of surveillance, the way it can behave like other political measures, and how it is useful and potentially essential for modern totalitarianism.

The example of the Stasi makes it very clear that surveillance can meaningfully serve the state and its need for power. The Stasi existed to act for the ruling party in East Germany and to ensure that those under the regime were kept within certain limits. The head of the Stasi, Erich Mielke, had great power politically as a member of the ruling inner circle, the Politburo. His position and the fear of both him and his organisation (Fitzmaurice 2000) reflects the tie between the Stasi and the state.

Great power and flexibility was afforded to the rulers of the state by the actions of the Stasi, leading the party to encourage and fund the work of the Stasi. The leadership could through high level politics outsource involvement on a much lower level to the Stasi and maintain their authoritarian positions more effectively. In this way, surveillance is much like propaganda. In a way that is not immediately obvious, surveillance is able to have a widespread impact on individuals according to the wishes of those in power.

In the GDR, those in power wanted to actively control the lives of their citizens, and ensure behaviour according to the rules of the state. Surveillance might serve those who want control particularly effectively. The Stasi was able to influence people through their surveillance and related actions due to their spread throughout East German society. The Stasi was able to make its way into the groups it considered 'enemies', such as the Church. Many members of the church were Stasi members or informants. By this method of infiltration, surveillance is a useful tool to those who wish to effectively control their populations.

Groups or individuals that the state wishes to silence or remove can be effectively handled through surveillance. Surveillance creates a covert and effective root to attack those an authoritarian state wishes to, rather than other methods which are more easily noticeable and preventable. On the other hand, methods such as propaganda and traditional policing cannot prevent those working actively to escape the reach of those in power or spreading their own ideas in secret. Furthermore, surveillance has the ability to create an atmosphere of fear, where one is unaware of who may be an informant. This forces one to become acutely aware of what not to say to others and can practically silence the spread of unwanted information. A consideration of who 'worked for' the Stasi and thereby who or what the Stasi was or was at least made of is important. The number of Stasi informants was far greater than the number of full-time Stasi officers (Bruce 2014). Here we can see one of the Stasi's most powerful tools for effective surveillance: seeping into the small parts of our societies. In schools, factories, churches, and families the Stasi had total surveillance on a truly low level with individuals informing on the actions of others without having to be fully employed by the Stasi. Surveillance could occur on a much more significant scale and impact every single person.

Consideration of the scale of the Stasi and the methods by which it was achieved has major implications with the development of technology more recently. There is a prevalence of sophisticated devices with microphones and cameras, which the Stasi went to great lengths to plant in private places, but that we carry around with us and use in our daily lives. The Stasi's attempts at hiding cameras and microphones without raising suspicion to infiltrate people's private lives is rather startling considering the telecommunications devices that we are so often surrounded by and think nothing of.

There often seemed a need to justify the actions and existence of the Stasi, either politically or to the people. The East German authorities presented themselves as acting for the people and in particular particularly against Fascism as part of a very strong reaction to the actions of the Nazi party who had previously ruled in a united Germany. Just as the authorities held mock elections, where the SED would always win and the description of the Berlin Wall as an 'Anti-Fascist' measure (*Antifaschistischer Schutzwall*), the actions of authoritarianism are often explained in some way that appears genuine. Similarly, surveillance by the Stasi was presented as acting for the protection of people. In our own lives we may see heavy surveillance explained as preventing crime or terrorism.

Similarly the Stasi's supposed purpose is visible in its name: the Ministry for State Security (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*). Here the reasoning for surveillance is presented just as the elections and wall were; as a genuine and necessary part of East German society.

These presentations and justifications of surveillance are rather telling of the nature of surveillance. The Stasi alongside other authoritarian measures in the GDR justified their existences to the people in a rather dangerous way. By presenting itself as protecting the people whilst instead working against them and treating many of them as enemies of the state, the Stasi presented outwardly a rather different image to what it was. Although many East Germans surely knew of its true purpose, the naming and presentation gives the opportunity for one to see the actions of the Stasi in a good light and accept as necessary as it described itself.

We may often here in discussions of state surveillance, that surveillance should not impact those that are innocent and exists only to catch wrongdoers. It is this sentiment that Anna Funder describes in *Stasiland* when discussing her conversation with a man in the park in reference to the Berlin Wall: "I know this argument as well: if you didn't buck the system, then it wouldn't harm you. But, from what I have seen, it probably would." (Funder 2003) The potential for one to accept or ignore the authoritarian measures of a surveillance agency may have to do with the image they assert, as looking out for people.

Naturally, the Stasi required a large number of people to work with them or rather for them in order to carry out surveillance on the scale that they did (Bruce 2014) and perhaps the fabrications of the Stasi encouraged this: the belief that working for the Stasi is upholding the law and living in the right way. Funder's *Stasiland* discusses this also when an ex-Stasi officer, Herr Christian, describes his reasons for joining the Stasi: "but he stayed with the Firm [Stasi]. 'I've always had an acute sense of duty to obey the law,' he says, 'and I thought it was the right thing to do.'" (Funder 2003)

The Stasi came to an unexpected end. Following the declining interest of the previously heavily invested Soviet Union in maintaining a powerful regime in East Germany, and the later fall of the Berlin Wall as part of "The Peaceful Revolution" in 1989, the Stasi fell with the regime it was a part of. The Stasi and the state enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, serving each others needs. Towards the end of the end of the GDR, the Stasi struggled to maintain its grip on the people. In turn the GDR began seeing an increase in pro-democracy sentiment and mobilisation. Arguably

the tightly knit relationship between the Stasi and the state is what sealed the fate of the surveillance organisation once the all powerful state that had created it and allowed it to exist had started to fade away. Here we may be able to gather that in modern authoritarian systems, surveillance is not only beneficial to, but essential for those in power. Those who desire to rule authoritatively over people in modern states with high population cities and technology such as printers, typewriters, radio, and television which can be used to turn the people against authorities need surveillance in order to ensure these very things become non existent.

The Stasi was somewhat successful in the control of communications and telecommunications. Although the regulation of items such as typewriters or printing equipment were highly regulated, the Stasi was not able to prevent a rather powerful weapon that was used by the western powers. The state engaged in heavy censorship of materials such as books and engaged in absolute control of East German radio, television, and print media. Nonetheless, people were still able to receive western broadcasting on their radio and television sets. Despite the illegality of this, the authorities were unwilling or unable to thoroughly police this and people were able to see broadcasting such as news from the outside world, breaking down the highly censored walls of the GDR, and allowing in outside knowledge. Parallels may be drawn to modern authoritarian regimes that potentially pay more attention to these matters which pays dividends for those in control.

Arguably, this is the most significant area in which the Stasi could have done more work to further exert and maintain control over the people. The ability of people to listen to outside broadcasting afforded influence to West Germans and NATO in East German borders with relatively little effort (Markham 1984; Nicholson 2014). Censorship can thusly be viewed as a very powerful tool of authoritarianism and it is one that could have been even more effectively used the Stasi given that surveillance agencies have the potential to discover and regulate the spread of information in many ways. The Stasi's failure to prevent people watching and listening to foreign broadcasts may have disintegrated the other tools of propaganda and disinformation that the authorities were naturally trying to simultaneously leverage. The information people were given now had a basis for being untrue through West German broadcasting and may have indeed had a large contribution to the events at the end of the East German state.

The Stasi represents more than just surveillance as it has been seen otherwise historically. East Germany is arguably the first example

of modern surveillance state: one which leverages technology and modern methods in order to monitor and potentially control the public. Arguably the most important characteristic of surveillance of is that it might be essential for modern authoritarianism: it certainly was for the SED and its lack of public support (Jarausch 2014). Learning from the Stasi and the regime it was created by may be key in preventing such regimes in the future or such inhumane, widespread, and totalitarian surveillance in our own time.

The Stasi shows the nature of surveillance rather well. Although the Stasi does not define surveillance it does show a very successful, powerful, and heavily used version of it and gives an example that reflects the ways in which surveillance can be successful and unsuccessful. We can observe, for example, that a modern authoritarian state must, potentially through surveillance, engage in careful censorship and limit the use of technology to bypass state censorship.

The Stasi existed for the state and it seems that surveillance is so useful to authoritarians that it might even be considered essential given the nature of modern society. The close relationship between authoritarianism and surveillance is one to note. If a state does not wish to act in an authoritarian way then its uses for heavy surveillance are questionable, particularly given the large investments required, yet for an authoritarian state, the benefits of surveillance are obvious in modern times as shown by the Stasi. The Stasi undoubtedly shows the progression of surveillance into the modern era: no longer a romantic endeavour of espionage and trickery, but instead a vast process, a machine that can eat up and spit out entire populations which the East German authorities were able to create a very powerful version of which has clearly inspired imitators and thinkers to attempt to build one in the Stasi's image, perhaps without its shortcomings and perhaps to further advance the modern science of surveillance.

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