

## 4.4 THE STASI AND ESPIONAGE IN THE GDR

### ? FOCUS QUESTION:

- How is life controlled under a totalitarian regime?

STANDARD #2 TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE.

STANDARD #6 POWER, AUTHORITY AND GOVERNANCE.

### LESSON OVERVIEW:

Living in a democratic society, American adolescents are not familiar with how their lives would be scrutinized and restricted under a totalitarian regime. This lesson features a combination of selected scenes from the 2006 Academy Award-winning film *The Lives of Others* and a simulation of what life would be like, if one was unaware of being watched and recorded. Students will study the effects of the *Stasi* on the lives of ordinary people living in the German Democratic Republic.

### TEACHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The GDR was among the most closed and repressive of the Soviet bloc countries. The *Stasi* (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* – Ministry of State Security) was the domestic and foreign intelligence body, secret police, and official investigation organization of the GDR. The Communist party founded it on February 8, 1950 in order to protect and enforce the interests of the party (Spiegel Online, 2011). The main function of the *Stasi* was to eliminate political beliefs that opposed Communist ideology and to detect politically unacceptable behavior among its citizens. In order to get as much information as possible and to expose people who had thoughts and opinions critical of the regime, the *Stasi* spied on people and many homes were bugged. The *Stasi* also used heavy-handed methods such as intimidation and blackmail in order to demonstrate power and to make it clear that an adversarial attitude against the GDR would result in serious consequences. Political opponents were quickly imprisoned. From the West German perspective, the most obvious sign of the GDR's repressive system was its control of the freedom of movement. Even before the Berlin Wall was constructed in 1961, people who tried to cross the barbed-wire fence that ran the length of the country to get into West Germany were shot at (Film Education, 2011). In 1991, after heated debate as to whether the *Stasi* files should be made accessible to those affected by them, the *Bundestag* passed the *Stasi* Records Law, which stated that both citizens of the former East Germany as well as foreigners had the right to view their files. Thousands were horrified to find proof that they had been spied on by friends, family members, and lovers. By the end of the period of communist rule, it is estimated that the *Stasi* had nearly 100,000 employees and as many as two million collaborators (Democracy Web, 2011).



### 🕒 TIME:

(6-7) 45 minute class periods

**INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES:**

- Stasi Articles Handout (**Handout 4.4.1 on Instructional Resource Disc**)
- *The Lives of Others* Worksheet (**Handout 4.4.2 on Instructional Resource Disc**)
- Stasi Surveillance Report (**Handout 4.4.3 on Instructional Resource Disc**)

**PROCEDURE:****DAYS 1-2:****Introduction to the GDR and the Stasi**

**ANTICIPATORY SET:** The teacher should ask students what makes their lives enjoyable and gives them satisfaction. How would their lives change if they knew they were being watched and their actions recorded?

After completing the Anticipatory Set, the teacher should introduce several important acronyms:

1. GDR: German Democratic Republic (English for *Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, *DDR*; more commonly known in English as East Germany)
2. SED: Socialist Unity Party of Germany (English for *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*)
3. SMA: Soviet Military Administration (organization in charge of East Germany after World War II)
4. KPD: Communist Party of Germany (English for *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*) founded in the 1920s
5. Stasi: Ministry for State Security (English for *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*)

In order to understand the operations of the secret police in the GDR, the teacher should provide students with an understanding of totalitarianism and a brief history of Germany after its defeat by the four Allied powers in World War II. The teacher may want to ask the students to conduct brief research using either their textbooks or online resources. The teacher may also show the 24-minute-long *Field Trip to Berlin* DVD (with its accompanying Instructional Guide) also provided by the Transatlantic Outreach Program (TOP). The teacher should distribute the *Stasi Articles Handout (Handout 4.4.1 on Instructional Resource Disc)* for students to read.

Here are a few questions for either classroom discussion or for students to consider while conducting their background research:

1. Describe how the Soviet Union's administration of its occupied zone of Germany differed from that of Great Britain, the United States, and France? When was the German Democratic Republic (GDR) established?
2. Who was Walter Ulbricht? What key events during the early years of his administration (in the 1950s) helped East Germany become more powerful in Eastern Europe?
3. What events caused Ulbricht to order the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961?
4. Describe how Ulbricht and the Communist Party restructured the economy to both bolster the GDR and also to pay the reparations required by the Soviet Union. Why could this era have caused so many workers to escape to West Germany?
5. List the changes that occurred in the 1960s that had a somewhat positive effect on employment in the GDR.

As part of introducing the *Stasi*, the teacher should ask students to reflect on the following question: How do you think average GDR citizens felt about their government and what it was providing for them during the 1950s and 1960s?

After reading the following passage of *Stasiland*, the 2003 book by Australian journalist Anna Funder, students should answer the following questions:

1. What do you think Funder means by the statement, "But its broader remit [goal] was to protect the Party from the people?"
2. What does this say about the SED's belief in the citizens of the GDR?

*“The Stasi was the internal army by which the government kept control. Its job was to know everything about everyone, using any means it chose,” (Funder, 2003, p. 5) [...] “The Stasi’s brief was to be ‘shield and sword’ of the Communist Party, called [...] the SED. But its broader remit [goal] was to protect the Party from the people. It arrested, imprisoned and interrogated anyone it chose. It inspected all mail in secret rooms above post offices (copying letters and stealing any valuables), and intercepted, daily, tens of thousands of phone calls. It bugged hotel rooms and spied on diplomats. It ran its own universities, hospitals, elite sports centers and terrorist training programs for Libyans and the West Germans of the Red Army Faction. It pockmarked the countryside with secret bunkers for its members in the event of World War III. Unlike secret services in democratic countries, the Stasi was the mainstay of State power. Without it, and without the threat of Soviet tanks to back it up, the SED regime could not have survived” (Funder, 2003, p. 59).*



Next, the teacher should introduce the 2006 Academy Award-winning film for Best Foreign Picture, *The Lives of Others* and show the first and second scenes. The teacher should distribute *The Lives of Others* Worksheet (**Handout 4.4.2 on Instructional Resource Disc**), which lists the characters and specific questions for each scene that will be used in the lesson. The students should answer the questions either while watching the film, immediately thereafter, or as part of their homework. *The Lives of Others* has an “R” rating. For many schools, this rating may be problematic and require administration approval and special advance notification to parents. Teachers may desire to show the entire film or may be more inclined to show selected scenes which relate more directly to the theme of the *Stasi*.

#### **DAYS 3-4:**

#### **The “Enemies” of the GDR**

The teacher should call upon two or three students to share their responses to the questions from the previous day’s scenes from *The Lives of Others*.

Then the teacher should inform the students that for the duration of this lesson (over the next few days), they will be part of a Simulation on the *Stasi*. For this activity, students will “become” typical working-class citizens of the GDR. The teacher should *secretly* select several students in the class to become *Stasi* informants.

#### **Stasi Simulation: Structuring Class for the Week and Assigning Roles**

- The teacher should arrange the desks into five groups (depending on the size of the class, there should be at least four students in each group). These groups should be identified as A, B, C, D, E. The students will sit with these groups for the duration of this lesson on the *Stasi*.
- Each desk in each group should be numbered 1, 2, 3 ... (use a bright, large Post-it note). When the students enter the room, the teacher should give each student an index card with a group letter and desk number. The student should look at the card and give it back to the teacher before taking their seat.
- The teacher should pre-determine which student in each group should get a (\*) symbol next to their desk number; these students have been chosen to be informants. The teacher should be careful to designate a different desk number in each group as the informant, so the rest of the students cannot figure out which number is the informant. The teacher should instruct the informants NOT to reveal their identities to anyone.

Examples of assignment cards:

Group A, Seat 1

Group B, Seat 2 (\*)

Group C, Seat 3

Group D, Seat 4 (\*)

In the discussion of *The Lives of Others*, the teacher should point out that as indicated in the first scene, one of the main concerns of the *Stasi* was to figure out who aided escapees in their quest to leave the GDR. The film’s protagonist, Gerd Wiesler, an expert *Stasi* interrogator, commented to the trainees that these people were “the enemies of socialism.” The teacher should ask the students to define what this might mean.

Next, the teacher should read another passage from Anna Funder’s *Stasiland*. This is an excerpt from an interview with an ex-*Stasi* member named Herr Winz. He comments about their “enemy:”

“You were right. Capitalism is even worse than you told us it would be. In the GDR, you could go out alone at night as a woman. You could leave your apartment door open. [...] This capitalism is, above all, exploitation! It is unfair. It’s brutal. The rich get richer and the masses get steadily poorer. And capitalism makes war! German imperialism in particular! Each industrialist is a criminal at war with the other, each business at war with the next. [...] Capitalism blunders the planet too!” (Funder, 2003, p. 86).

The students should now consider other “threats” to the *Stasi*. The teacher should ask the students: *What types of activities, in addition to escaping to West Germany, would be considered a “threat” to the GDR?* The teacher should create a table on the board based on these categories and give students ten minutes in their group to fill in the blanks.

The teacher should have each group share a category or two. The students should discuss which categories might be more threatening than others.

Categories	Type of activity that could be “threatening”	Person who would engage in this activity
Political		
Economic		
Social		
Religious		
Intellectual		
Artistic		

Next, the students should watch scenes 6 and 8 of *The Lives of Others*. The students should answer the questions on the handout (**Handout 4.4.2 on Instructional Resource Disc**) either while watching the film or immediately thereafter or for homework.

**DAY 5:**

**The Role of the Informant**

The students should sit in their groups in their assigned seats. The teacher should begin class with a brief discussion of the scenes of *The Lives of Others* viewed the previous day:

- What do the wire-tapping scene and Frau Meineke’s observation illustrate about loyalty to the SED?
- At Dreyman’s 40<sup>th</sup> birthday party, there are three or four instances of friendships becoming difficult because of real or assumed *Stasi* interference. What does this say about relationships and friendships in the GDR?

The teacher should explain the homework:

- Student informants (\*) should be told secretly to select one student in their group to watch and then write a surveillance report over a day or two. Secretly distribute the *Stasi* Surveillance Report (**Handout 4.4.3 on Instructional Resource Disc**) to the chosen (\*) students only.
- For homework, the rest of the students should write a paragraph response to the following questions: Would informants be needed in high schools? Why or why not? Think about your average school day, where could you run into informants? At what locations? How many could be in your neighborhood?
- The teacher should not reveal that there are actually two assignments. The teacher should let all the students think that they are writing about informants. *The Stasi never needed any reason to watch people.*

*Disclaimer:* The goal is two-fold—for students to compose a report in the manner of the Stasi, and to create a slight sense of paranoia among the student body in the classroom, mimicking the social atmosphere of the GDR.

Student surveillance reports (\*) should be written in the most neutral manner possible, using their best efforts to keep the integrity and privacy of students intact. In order for the homework assignment to be fair and equitable, all students will have a writing assignment. But the non-informants will NOT know what the assignment for informants is.

#### **DAYS 6-7:**

#### **Stasi Reports and Further Investigative Activities**

Before the class period, the students should submit their homework questions to the teacher, so that she/he can read them and select the two most complete essays. The students should sit in their groups and the teacher will then read two to three reports from the informants and comment on the information collected. What would the *Stasi* have thought of their work?

The teacher should then ask the following questions:

- How did you feel before the report was read? Were you nervous, anxious?
- What do you think about the information revealed? Does it seem to reflect a careful observation of the student being watched?
- How could you as an observer get more detailed information on the person you observe?
- What would have helped you to act more secretly with your spying efforts?

Watch scene 12 of *The Lives of Others* and answer the questions either in class or for homework. For homework, the teacher should inform the students in the next and last day of this lesson, that they will learn what happened after the reunification of Germany in 1990. The students should consider the following questions:

- What do you predict happened to the majority of informants for the *Stasi*? Did they hide their identity?
- What do you predict happened to the people in charge who worked directly for the *Stasi*? Did they flee the country? Were they charged with serious crimes? What types of industries would be interested in hiring former *Stasi* employees? How did their fellow countrymen treat them after the reunification of Germany?
- Do you believe there are levels of “guilt” to be assigned to those who worked for the *Stasi*? Who were the most guilty? Are they even guilty of anything at all?
- Should the people have access to their *Stasi* files? Should these all be destroyed?

#### **DAY 8:**

#### **Tearing Down the Wall**

The teacher should arrange the classroom for a *Take a Stand* activity. The desks should be in the perimeter of the classroom. On one side of the room, the word “Yes” should be written; on the other side of the room “No.”

When the students arrive, they should stand in the middle of the room. The teacher should read the following statement: “The German government should allow people the right to have access to their *Stasi* files.” The students should move to the side of the room that best represents their opinion. Students can be in the middle, against the wall (close to the signs), near to the wall, etc. The teacher should call on individual students to explain their placement.

Finally the teacher should ask the students if they would want to know who their informants were during the class simulation. What type of pressure could this put on relationships in class?

The students should watch the final scenes (26-28) of *The Lives of Others* and discuss the questions on the worksheet.

**WHOLE GROUP REFLECTION:**

- Throughout this lesson, there are many opportunities for the teacher to engage students in discussions on surveillance during the GDR. It might be interesting to speculate on how the methods employed by the *Stasi* would be different today with Facebook, texting, and electronic means of communication. The teacher might pose the question to students of whether or not they feel that too much information is stored in cyberspace? Are we being spied upon and not even aware of it? What are the “Big Brother” aspects of American life (city surveillance cameras, flying surveillance drones, EZ-Pass cameras at toll booths, cell phone cameras and video capability, cameras in banks, convenience stores, or in their own schools)?

**MODIFICATION:**

- Teachers with limited time might want to either eliminate the movie *The Lives of Others* and concentrate on the readings and the simulation, or use the movie and the readings and eliminate the simulation activity. The readings may be assigned for homework rather than having students read them in class.

**EXTENSIONS:**

- The teacher might want to encourage students to visit the website of the Leipzig *Stasi* headquarters - die Runde Ecke, <http://www.runde-ecke-leipzig.de/cms>. This would make an excellent follow-up activity to this lesson.
- A 1988 Michael Jackson concert in West Berlin prompted security concerns for the *Stasi*. This information was not discovered until years after the reunification. Students might conduct internet research and consider the following questions:
  - a. Why would a Michael Jackson concert near the Brandenburg Gate be considered a threat to East Germany in 1988? What was happening in the Soviet Union and its satellite states at that time?
  - b. Do you think that the *Stasi* had just cause to be worried?
  - c. How did economics play into deciding on the location for Jackson’s concert?
  - d. On the other hand, a month after Jackson’s concert, American musician Bruce Springsteen was allowed to perform in East Germany. Why was he treated differently than Jackson?
- Interviews with Irmtraud and Tobias Hollitzer, mother and son, who grew up in the German Democratic Republic and experienced the *Stasi*, appear in Lesson 4.2 on The Peaceful Revolution in Leipzig. (**Handout 4.2.2 on Instructional Resource Disc**). Students should read and discuss the Hollitzers’ experiences with the *Stasi*.

**Sources:**

This lesson is a shortened version of 2009 TOP Fellow Jeanne Scheppach’s lesson.

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