

This 2006 German-language film immediately sets its story's historical context:

"1984, East Berlin. Glasnost is nowhere in sight. The population of the GDR [East Germany, or the German Democratic Republic] is kept under strict control by the Stasi, the East German Secret Police.

"Its force of 100,000 employees and 200,000 informers safeguards the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Its declared goal: 'To know everything.'"

The film first intercuts between two scenes: A prisoner being relentlessly interrogated, finally breaking down; and a classroom where Stasi students learn the techniques of effective interrogation from Wiesler (played by Ulrich Mühe). This establishes the total control over human life wielded by the "Shield and Sword" of the omnipotent State.

Wiesler and his superior attend a play written by Dreyman (played by Sebastian Koch). There is no reason to believe that Dreyman is other than a good, loyal, obedient socialist. But the order comes down the chain of command, for Wiesler to put Dreyman under surveillance. This means Wiesler and another agent must listen round-the-clock to what happens in Dreyman's apartment, and make complete notes. Reporting to his superior, Wiesler describes Dreyman as "an arrogant type, the kind I warn my students about."

Suspecting he's being bugged, Dreyman and some friends discuss some false information that the Stasi would act on. No action is taken (the Stasi suspect it's only bait and don't act on it), and Dreyman and his friends falsely assume that he is not under surveillance.

Wiesler betrays no emotion as he monitors every aspect of Dreyman's life. You know, in a strongly authoritarian situation like this, there are obvious oppressors (the government), and the victims (those being oppressed). Remember, socialism is public ownership of the means of production, and that "means of production" is human lives and minds. You can't get any more "totalitarian" than ownership of a person's life and mind. (It is, essentially, a form of slavery.)

So the life-damaging effects of a dictatorship on someone like Dreyman are easy to see, and a decent person would have sympathy for this victim.

But here's something interesting to think about. In his book, *The Ominous Parallels*, Leonard Peikoff describes not only the mind- and life-deadening effects of totalitarianism on the oppressed; he claims the same effects rebound onto the oppressors.

That's a complicated idea that can't be explored here; but I couldn't help thinking about it as I watched Wiesler during this movie. In a free society, a person finds a productive purpose and feels pride over

his achievement. But can a Stasi agent feel a sense of achievement, or pride, on discovering little details about another person's life, which can be used to destroy that person? Or would the agent repress any such thoughts, thinking, "I'm only doing my duty"?

Something really interesting starts happening behind Wiesler's stone face. This is a key part of the story.

At one point, Dreyman's apartment is searched by a squad of Stasi goons. They throw books and other items on the floor as they search. They slash the sofa's cushions. They find nothing. The head goon, handing Dreyman a form, says, "In the unlikely event that damage has occurred, you may claim compensation." (You can probably

guess what would happen if he *did* claim compensation!)

You know how I review movies. I give very little away. I'm skipping over dozens of plot details, including Dreyman's actress lady-friend. But here are a few items:

It's four years later. The Berlin Wall has fallen.

Two more years pass. Dreyman discovers for the first time that he had been under full surveillance. He requests the records the Stasi made on him. He makes a startling discovery.

Two more years pass.

This film has one of the most satisfying endings I've ever seen in a movie. No, there is no bloodbath where the ex-Stasi agents are reduced to the garbage they already were.

I'll tell you exactly how it ends! (And this will spoil *nothing!*)

Wiesler enters a bookstore and buys a book.

All right, all right... I'm not telling the *whole* story here.

Now, if you watch this movie, consider the following odious fact: There are people today who openly, unashamedly, unapologetically advocate the kind of society depicted under the Stasi.

Of course, few such people are honest enough to admit there would be a need for a Stasi-like government entity to ensure that each person is a "good citizen" in any society where human life needs to be "regulated."

But poison sprinkled with a little sugar is still poison.

I first watched *The Lives of Others* (Das Leben der Anderen) some months ago. I watched all the extras, including a short but interesting interview with the film's writer/director. I watched it again, to prepare for this article. Next? I'm doing what I seldom do with my home videos: I'll be watching it again, with the writer/director's commentary.

The movie makes an interesting side point. Alcoholism and suicide are rampant in dictatorships, resulting from the physical helplessness of being unfree, and the need to hide what one is thinking, both

# Totalitarian Surveillance



## The Lives of Others: A movie written and directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck



from the ever-vigilant authorities, and from oneself. The character Jerska is a director (Volkmar Kleinert) who has displeased the Stasi (somehow), and is now blacklisted and unable to work. It's not that he can't *find* work; people would appreciate his talents in a free society. He is *forbidden* by the State to work. Several characters in the film are like this: Not prisoners in a jail, but wearing invisible chains and straight-jackets; walking, not-quite-alive because they've been deprived of their life's goals. What can one do? Drink and not think too much.

This movie is rated R, for "some sexuality/nudity."

It was issued on DVD and Blu-Ray.

Barnes and Noble does not seem to carry it.

New and used copies are available on Amazon.

## More about The Lives of Others

I wrote that I planned to watch *The Lives of Others* for a third time, with the commentary by screenwriter / director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. Well, since I set those words down, I *did* watch the commentary. (Yes! Developments are developing, even as this issue of *The PRC* is in development!)

You can view a movie on many levels. Take it for what it is; what you see is what you get; that's it. A totally legitimate approach to a movie.

In this case, however, the historical and political background got me thinking, and wanting to learn more. It led me to do some online research, some of which led to two other articles in this issue.

Directing my research in another direction led to viewing the writer / director commentary. I wanted to know his thoughts on his own film. Here are a few points I gained from that commentary:

- This was a difficult, long-range project. Research and writing took a long time. (Hey, that should come as no surprise to me, or certain others reading this.)

- von Donnersmarck selected the actors carefully, even if they had very small roles. He remarked on the importance of one actor with a very short role and said nothing, who had just the right expression of evil menace as he stood in the background. He commented that several actors had prominent careers on the East German stage (something few of us watching this in the States would be expected to know). Several actors (in real life)

Many, many copies are listed on eBay.

"Those who declare, today, that force is the only way to deal with men (with the unstated footnote that they, the speakers, would be safe in the position of rulers), ought to take a careful look at the history of absolute monarchies—and of modern dictatorships as well. Under the rule of force, it is the rulers who are in greatest danger, who live—and die—in permanent terror. The court intrigues, the plots and counterplots, the coups d'état, the known executions and secret assassinations are a matter of record. So are the purges of Party leaders and their cliques, in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia." — Ayn Rand, "A Nation's Unity." You'll see this point in the film, as each Stasi bureaucrat is terrified by what the whims of the next-level bureaucrat will bring.

were persecuted by, even imprisoned by, the Stasi. von Donnersmarck many times expresses his high regard for the quality of acting, commenting on an especially well-done expression or gesture. He brought my attention to several subtleties I had not picked up on, watching the film twice previously.

- The film was made 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and German re-unification began. von Donnersmarck remarks on the difficulty of finding suitable locations. Something else interesting: A person making a phone booth call from the West German side is shown for a few seconds. The writer / director points out several visual background cues that indicate it was on the Western side, which are possibly lost on non-German audiences.

- There are several comments on the detrimental effects a dictatorship has on human life. Some very perceptive thoughts. It reminded me that I'd like to do an article, someday, on "Why Do Some People Hate Freedom So Much?"

- I've elsewhere remarked on how much I liked the film's ending. von Donnersmarck's comments enhanced my enjoyment even further.

I re-watched other special features on the DVD: deleted scenes; the half-hour interview with Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck; the "making of" documentary.

I certainly got more than my money's worth when I purchased this DVD. I hope you get much of value from it, if you decide to seek out *The Lives of Others*.

## 10 "Subversive" Jokes That Could've Landed You in an East German Prison

Here are 10 more jokes that were popular in East Germany, but were almost certainly too hot (or just too honest) for the Stasi.

Making fun of politicians is an American tradition. Some jokes cross lines of good taste; some are unfair or unfunny. Good taste and humor aside, Americans take it for granted that we can poke fun at politicians and our leaders.

What's the difference between Obama and God? God doesn't think he is Obama.

What does the Trump administration use instead of emails? Alternative fax.

Mocking political leaders seems to be a bipartisan pastime, accepted by the right and the left. And for good reason. A good joke has psychological, social, and spiritual benefits, research shows. Humans use jokes to lift the spirits of others, reduce stress, and to mock absurdity and dogmas.

Because of their potency, historically many have seen such jokes as less than funny. As we near the 30-year anniversary of the

by Jon Miltimore  
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fall of the Berlin Wall, it's worth noting that East Germans faced the threat of prison for mocking the state.

Bodo Müller, an author of East German jokes, says the Stasi (official name *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, or Ministry for State Security) viewed jokes as subversive propaganda. *The Lives of Others*, perhaps the best film of the 21st century (one guy's opinion), revealed the terror an ill-timed joke could trigger.

Telling these jokes invited investigation by the Stasi, Müller says. They'd show up at a joker's home and interrogate friends and neighbors. Of the 100 people identified in Müller's research, 64 were convicted. Convicted joke-tellers served between one and three years. At least one man served four (he must have told a real knee-slapper, like the one about \*General Secretary Honecker kissing Brezhnev). The accused were of course never convicted of telling jokes. Rather, they were found guilty of "state-endan-

gering propaganda and hate speech”; the jokes themselves were never read publicly.

This joke about two East German communist leaders, Wilhelm Reinhold Pieck and Otto Grotewohl, for example, landed a man before a judge in 1956.

Pieck and Grotewohl are visiting Stalin in Moscow.

Stalin gives them a car. But when they want to leave, they realize the car doesn't have a motor.

Stalin says: “You don't need a motor if you're already going downhill.”

Here are 10 more jokes that were popular in East Germany, but were almost certainly too hot (or just too honest) for the Stasi, including several about the Trabant, the worst car in history.

1. Why do Stasi officers make such good taxi drivers? — You get in the car and they already know your name and where you live.

2. What's the best feature of a Trabant? — There's a heater at the back to keep your hands warm when you're pushing it.

3. Capitalism is the exploitation of man by man. Under socialism, it is exactly the other way around.

4. What would happen if the desert became a socialist country? — Nothing for a while... then the sand becomes scarce.

5. Why do the Stasi work together in groups of three? — You need one who can read, one who can write, and a third to keep an eye on the two intellectuals.

6. The Stasi held a competition for the best political joke. First prize? Fifteen to twenty years.

7. How can you use a banana as a compass? — Place a banana on the Berlin Wall. The bitten end would point east. (Bananas were scarce and deeply desired in East Germany, in contrast to West Germany, where they were ubiquitous.)

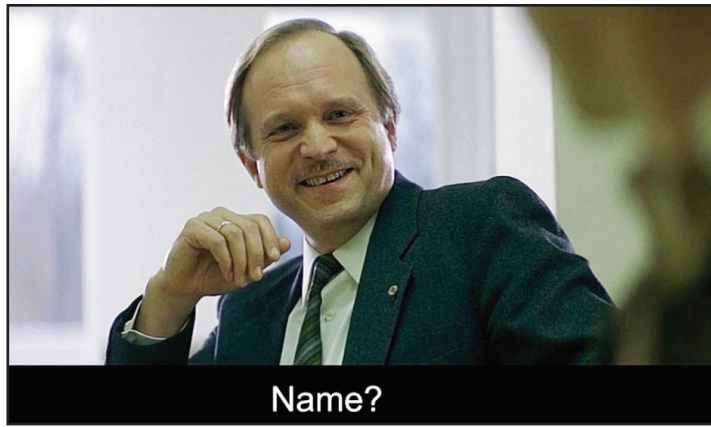


Image Credit: Wiedemann & Berg Filmproduktion

8. A man-on-the-street poll was taken in three countries: “What is your opinion of the recently announced shortage of meat?” In the US, they asked, “What shortage?” In Poland, they asked, “What is meat?” And in East Germany, they asked, “What is an opinion?”

9. How do you catch a Trabi? — Just stick chewing gum on the highway. (An allusion to the Trabant's weak motor.)

10. Why did Erich Honecker get a divorce? — Because Brezhnev kisses better than his wife. (This joke is

a reference to the socialist fraternal kiss, also known as the Triple Brezhnev.)

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The photo heading this article is from *The Lives of Others*. How the photo relates to the article would require elaborate explanation (see the movie, and you'll know). Apparently, Your Editor is not the only one who holds this film in high regard.

The “10 more” in the subtitle implies there was a previous article on this topic. Your Editor failed to find it.



Film images from IMDB.com

