

## THE LIVES OF OTHERS: EAST GERMANY REVISITED?

Symposium at the GHI, April 30, 2007. Convener: Bernd Schaefer (GHI). Participants: Jens Gieske (Office of the Federal Commissioner for Stasi Records, Berlin), Thomas Lindenberger (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, Potsdam), Steven Pfaff (University of Washington, Seattle), Mary Beth Stein (George Washington University).

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's film *Das Leben der Anderen* [*The Lives of Others*] (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2006) is set in the final years of East Germany's decaying socialist regime. It tells the story of the clandestine relationship between a loyal artist driven to dissent and the coldly professional secret policeman assigned to his case who, provoked by disillusionment and disgust, becomes his furtive protector. *The Lives of Others* has proven a milestone in contemporary German cinema. Not only did it attract millions of viewers worldwide, but it was also critically acclaimed and honored with the Motion Picture Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 2006. These distinctions alone would make the film important. However, it is also the first dramatic feature-length motion picture to treat the history of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Unlike the comedies *Goodbye Lenin!* (2003) and *Sonnenallee* (1999), which touched on serious issues but made little claim to sustained engagement with the historical issues raised by life under the Communist dictatorship, Donnersmarck's film deals squarely with the role of the Ministry for State Security (Stasi) in securing the regime's hold over society. In its ambitions to portray the authentic workings of the police state, the sordid reality of Stasi surveillance and infiltration, and the grubbiness of everyday life in the GDR, the film provides an opportunity to revisit East German history. Yet the panelists questioned the extent to which the film accurately depicts the workings of the Stasi or provides a compelling interpretation of its place in GDR society, and whether it obscures as much as illuminates East German history.

The GHI's Bernd Schaefer brought together a diverse panel, composed equally of German and American scholars, to discuss the film, its interpretation, and its public impact. Jens Gieske is an expert on the structures and personnel of the Ministry for State Security and author of *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter der Staatssicherheit: Personalstruktur und Lebenswelt, 1950–1989/90* (2000) and the authoritative *Der Mielke Konzern: Die Geschichte der Stasi* (2006). Thomas Lindenberger, author of *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur* (1999) and *Volkspolizei* (2003), is a social historian of the former GDR. Mary Beth Stein is an expert on German Cultural

Studies. Steven Pfaff is a sociologist and author of *Exit-Voice Dynamics and the Collapse of East Germany: The Crisis of Leninism and the Revolution of 1989* (2006). The diversity of the panel was reflected in differences of interpretation, even as the panelists settled on several common themes raised by the film.

Certainly, the panelists were united in praising *The Lives of Others* as an example of historical filmmaking with wide commercial and critical appeal. They credited it with reawakening interest in the GDR and its history on both sides of the Atlantic and for its potential to enliven the debate surrounding the East German past. Just how much so was evident in both the panel's presentations and in a well-informed and spirited question and answer session with the capacity audience of some two hundred people that followed. As historian Thomas Lindenberger rightly remarked at the outset of the panel, "movies, also movies based on a story set in the past, are not made to please historians." Nevertheless, in its claims to being a serious and factual treatment of a complex history with numerous ambiguities, the panelists made the case that the film bears closer scrutiny before it can be accepted as a window into a vanished but still painfully present society.

Several panelists thought that the film had done well in capturing the atmosphere of the place and time. Stein observed that the preponderance of grey tones and location shots are effective in recreating the atmosphere of East Berlin in the mid-1980s. More importantly, however, the film captures the repressive political climate in the GDR, one of suspicion and mistrust that permeated nearly all levels of society. Yet Gieseke, in particular, raised the film's shortcomings in the area of authentic historical depiction. Although Donnersmarck extensively researched the film and was lauded for its accurate detail, those details can be misleading. As much as Hauptmann Wiesler and the other Stasi agents speak in the clipped bureaucratic lingo and inhabit actual locations of the Ministry for State Security, there are several areas in which the film misrepresents the activities and everyday workings of the secret police. For one thing, Wiesler is portrayed as a sort of Stasi jack-of-all-trades, engaging in training, analysis, interrogation, technical installations, routine surveillance, etc. In reality, of course, the highly bureaucratic state security apparatus had a rational division of labor in which those functions were separated. Among other things, this would have complicated Wiesler's efforts to protect the objects of his surveillance and would have denied him so much control over the Dreyman case. Moreover, some of the tactics that Wiesler teaches in the intelligence school and employs against the artist couple Georg Dreyman and Christa-Marie Sieland were either no longer in use in the 1980s or had different applications than those depicted in the film.

These matters of detail aside, the bigger issue is whether a character like Wiesler was possible in the Stasi apparatus. Both Gieske and Lindenberger remind us that no historical precedent exists for a figure from within the Stasi who takes the side of the internal opposition. Indeed, the employees of the Stasi were known for their socially conventional views and lifestyles, hardly identifying with the bohemian traits of the artistic-intellectual milieu or those with nonconformist views. In fact, in the last years of the regime, stalwart hard-liners that would have preferred extreme measures against dissidents were more common than liberal sympathizers. Pfaff argued that institutional factors were predominant in producing these dispositions. The Stasi proved remarkably loyal to its master, the ruling party of the GDR. Leninist norms were effectively socialized and enforced, both through vertical and horizontal monitoring. Stasi personnel were highly professionalized, with a strong technocratic ethos. They were the elite cadres of the system, and were given their organized dependence on a regime which provided little space for autonomy. The portrayal of the Wiesler character and his work offers an overly optimistic portrait of the independence afforded the Stasi's agents. As Stein notes, not only is there no known case of an officer acting as Wiesler does, but the reconciliation between victim and perpetrator that we see at the film's conclusion is probably just as rare. Even so, Stein contends that Donnersmarck's film reminds us that there were tragic consequences of Stasi surveillance and political repression. To dismiss *The Lives of Others* as a fairy tale that never could have happened or insist on historical accuracy that corresponds to a "real GDR" that is no less contested today than it was back in 1984, is to demand too much of a film whose humanistic message and artistic merits are undeniable.

As Gieske aptly observed in his remarks, Wiesler's transformation into a secret guardian angel of George and Christa-Marie is an artist's fantasy of redemption. Wiesler is redeemed by his glimpses into the lifeworld of the artist and by his sharing of the beauty of the *Sonata for a Good Man*. Wiesler, we come to learn, becomes the good man through this process. In his flickering encounter with the sublime, Wiesler is morally awakened and comes to see his kinship with Georg (finalized over the corpse of the compromised Christa-Marie, another old artistic conceit, as Lindenberger sharply noted). In a sense, the panelists agreed, the film offers to the contemporary German public, or at least the urbane and educated section of it, a reconciliation fantasy. As Pfaff suggested, the transnational appeal of the film may lie in its optimism: The journey of Hauptmann Wiesler from orthodox technocrat to secret-sharer in the lives of Georg and Christa-Marie affirms the persistence of humanity even amidst the most soulless political conditions. Stein spoke more explicitly on this point. She noted that while the film can generically be seen

as a political thriller set in the last decade of the GDR, because the theme of goodness figures so prominently, it also operates on the level of a morality play examining human behavior and, in the final analysis, advancing the idea that goodness, categorically, overcomes the dictates of ideology. In the course of his surveillance, it is foremost poetry and music that open up new worlds of thought and feeling to Wiesler, even as he becomes painfully aware of his own isolation and emotional repression. For Stein, if the film's message is one of resistance to power, then it is a resistance informed by and expressed through art.

The panelists emphasized that the film should be an opportunity for specialists to remind the public that the GDR cannot be reduced to the Stasi, however central it was to the operation of the regime. Certainly, the Stasi was pervasive and had a broad impact on life in East Germany. It played a central role in maintaining the regime and suppressing threats to its political control, and its institutional reach was enormous. Yet, as Lindenberger pointed out, silence, opportunism, and indifference are as much a part of the story of East German society as are the black-and-white figures of the victims and perpetrators. Donnersmarck very briefly touches on the "gray zone" between opposition and repression in his depiction of Georg's neighbor, who helps him manage his secret of being unable to fix his necktie while keeping her own complicity with the Stasi's intrusion into his private sphere hidden. Still, this brilliant encounter remains no more than an arresting episode in the film and thus a missed opportunity to widen the scope of the story beyond artistic dissidents and secret police cadres. Just as importantly, argues Stein, by making the motive for Stasi surveillance of Dreyman the sexual desire of a corrupt government minister, the film fails to examine how the GDR identified political nonconformity. It was the combination of ideological zeal and paranoia, rather than base personal motives, that led to the arrogance of power in the GDR.

Since the opening of the Stasi archives, Stein reminded us, we have learned more about how the Stasi infiltrated the areas of art and literature, from the main publishing houses in the GDR to the East German Writers' Union, whose president, Hermann Kant, was revealed to be an unofficial collaborator. Even the dissident Prenzlauer Berg scene in the 1980s was largely created, organized, and undermined by the Ministry of State Security through the leading role of unofficial collaborator Sascha Anderson. The literature debate and the controversy over Christa Wolf's brief period of collaboration with the Stasi in her student days have also illuminated the bitter disappointment of many in both East and West who realized that widely admired, even critical writers were also affected by the climate of fear and repression. Dreyman, of course, is a different sort, one who retains his integrity even as he struggles to remain loyal to the

regime. Dreyman tries to defend his friend, Albert Jerska, who has come into official disfavor and who is suffering under the Stasi technique of *Zersetzung* (decomposition), aimed at the systematic destruction of an individual's professional and personal life through the dissemination of malicious rumor and creation of fear and suspicion within one's immediate social circle. Stein argues that Jerska's suicide functions as the catalyst for Dreyman's transformation from loyalist to opponent. This is because to be good in the way his friend's gift of the musical score "The Sonata of the Good Man" admonishes him to be is to use his literary talent and celebrity to publicize the problems of real existing socialism. However, because his journalistic efforts have no officially sanctioned outlet in the GDR, his only option is to publish anonymously in the West. Dreyman's transformation, in turn, triggers Wiesler's protective intervention based on an empathy for and identification with Dreyman that he did not initially exhibit. This can only occur if he sets aside political conviction, sees Dreyman as a fellow human being rather than an object, and acts in accordance with his emergent sense of an individual's goodness.

Pfaff urges us to see the role of the Stasi in institutional terms, as the central organization in the wider system of social control he labels a mechanism of coercive surveillance. By this he means a system of monitoring and enforcement that insinuated itself into the private sphere and induced hundreds of thousands of people, whether by fear or by favor, to collaborate in the political policing of society. However sinister it could be, the impact of the Stasi on East German society should not be overstated. Its purpose was to suppress dissent, hinder illegal emigration, and eliminate challenges to a Marxist-Leninist regime. For their part, very few ordinary East Germans risked an escape, sympathized with dissidents, or joined the nascent church-based opposition. The Stasi very effectively infiltrated all sources of opposition—the critical intelligentsia, the churches, independent artistic milieus—but this hardly touched the lives of most East Germans directly. Above all, the Stasi was an agency for information gathering. It did not decide the policies of GDR: That was the role of the Party.

Alongside incentives for compliance that included welfare benefits and low-cost basic consumption, the system of coercive surveillance anchored Leninist one-party rule by hindering exit from the country and squelching every form of critical voice, even that inspired by loyalty (such as Dreyman's). Given these conditions, most people publicly conformed, privately grumbled, and eschewed opposition. For Lindenberger, the key to improving historical understanding will be research and writing that provides greater insight into the everyday life of the regime and how its repressive apparatus fostered "practices of domination at the microlevel."

Accomplishing this will mean going beyond the theaters and salons of artists and the hushed meetings of the dissidents, on the one hand, and, on the other, the interrogation rooms and prison cells of the Stasi. It will necessitate exploring the neighborhoods, housing blocks, factory floors, schools, and countless other sites where relations of power met indifference, achieved conformity, or provoked opposition.

It is questionable whether the sort of explorations endorsed by the panelists would fully succeed as cinema, but they may help indicate how public scholarship might provide a more nuanced understanding. As Gieske observed in his remarks, "The genre of historical film is doubtlessly useful for awakening curiosity. At the same time, such films can contaminate our remembrance with a flood of artistic images or with what only appears to be authentic historical narrative." It appears from this panel discussion that Donnermarck's film provides material to support either understanding. Yet, for all the film's grounding in a certain time and place, the filmmaker's ambitions in probing the human soul are universal, and *The Lives of Others* should be understood primarily as a work of cinematic art, and only secondarily as a window on a contested past.

*Steven Pfaff*