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Neil MacGregor

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For Barrie Cook
Curator at the British Museum
Polymath, Colleague and Counsellor
sine quo non

2 Divided heaven



World Cup celebrations at the Brandenburg Gate, June 2014

been renovated and is now at the centre of a pedestrianized zone, the gathering point of choice for celebrations of all sorts. And in the summer of 2014 it was once again used for a triumphal entry into the city – not by a French invader, but by the German football team, returning victorious from the World Cup in Brazil.

In the next chapter I shall be going down Unter den Linden towards the east, to explore some of the memories of the Cold War division of Germany. It was so effective and profound that those who lived in East and West have few memories in common. What all do remember is the difficulty of travelling from one Germany to the other and the price paid by those who tried to do so without authorization.

The restored Reichstag, where the German Parliament meets, stands in the heart of Berlin. Because of its position near the former border dividing East and West Berlin, there are now few buildings near it and it is set between a meadow on one side, and the banks of the River Spree on the other. On most days, the riverside is busy with sightseers and strollers, such as you might find by the Seine or the Thames. But it quickly becomes obvious that this could not be either London or Paris; it could only be in Berlin. In various places beside the river are rows of white crosses.

Günter Litfen 24 August 1961

Udo Düllick 5 October 1961

Hans Räwel 1 January 1963

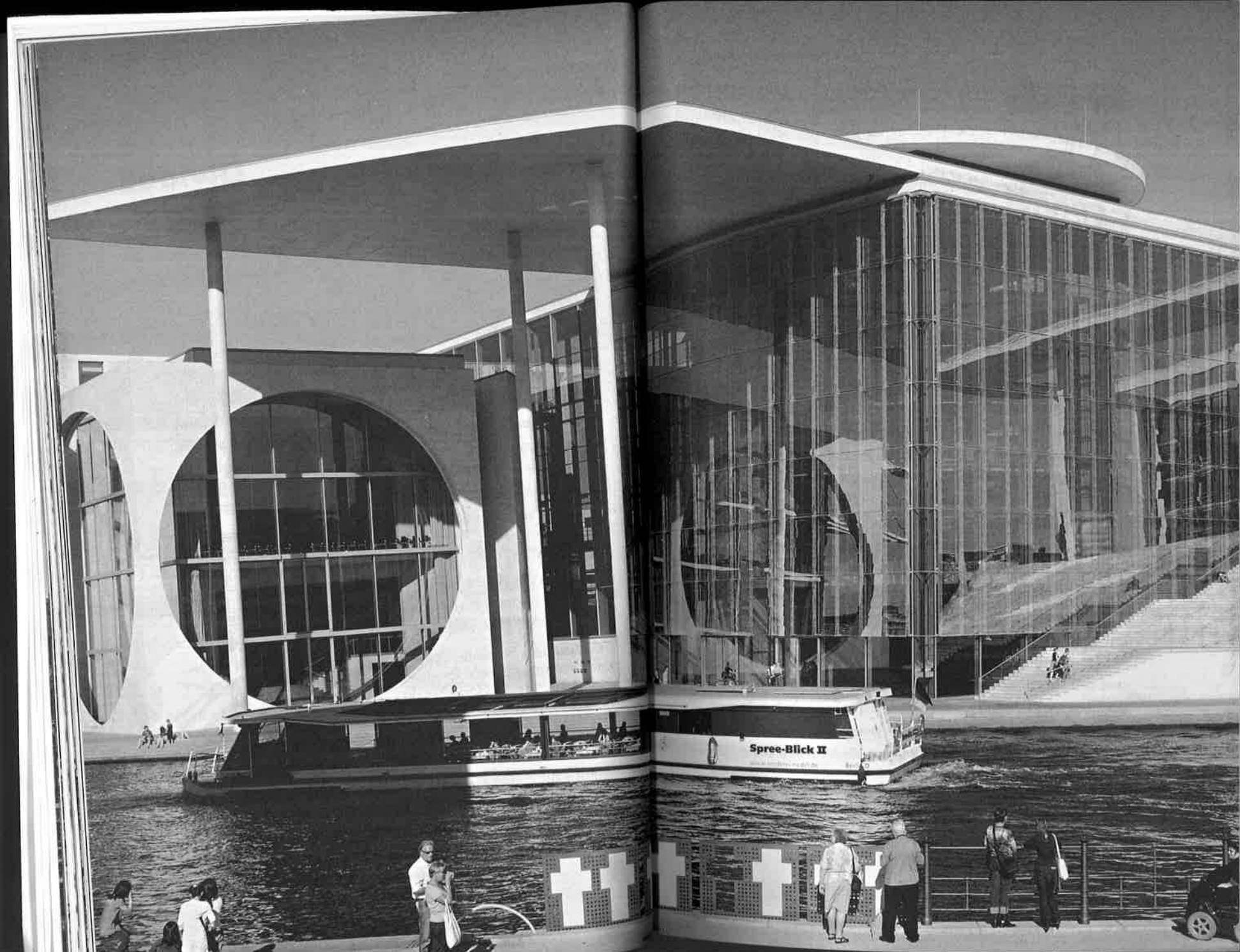
Klaus Schröter 4 November 1963

Heinz Sokolowski 25 November 1965

Marinetta Jirkowsky 22 November 1980

It seems like a war cemetery, because all the dead were young. But it is not – the names are of some of those who were killed trying to escape from East to West Berlin after the building in August 1961 of the most potent symbol of the Cold War: the Berlin Wall.

Overleaf: White crosses by the River Spree, with the Bundeskanzleramt behind





Christa Wolf, *Der geteilte Himmel*
(*Divided Heaven*, or *They Divided the Sky*), 1963

The deaths range in date from ten days after the building of the Wall to ten months before its removal. Twenty-five years after its fall in 1989, the most vivid, painful and problematic of all Germany's many memories of division remains the brutal splitting of the country. Every German over the age of thirty-five, whether from East or West, knows of families split, the human cost of an arbitrary, callous bureaucracy that regulated what movement there was between the two states – and of those who paid with their lives.

Der geteilte Himmel (*Divided Heaven*), written by the East German novelist Christa Wolf, was published in 1963, two years after the Berlin Wall went up. It made Christa Wolf's reputation, and has long been seen as the most thoughtful, poignant account of the divergence of the two Germanys as seen from the East. It tells the story of Rita and Manfred, young lovers living in the East before the Wall was built, when travel from East to West Berlin was still easy. Manfred becomes disillusioned with the East and does not return from a conference in West Berlin, where he feels the opportunities for his career are greater. Rita visits him but does not warm to the crowded consumerism of West Berlin. She decides to end her relationship with Manfred and to continue with her life in the East. She knows it is flawed, but she feels more at ease in a society where people at least aspire to work together.

The couple, ideally matched in every other respect, founder as the two Germanys diverge.

'At least they can't divide the sky,' says Manfred at the climax of the novel, when Rita chooses the communal ideals of East Germany, over a life with him in the individualist West. 'The sky?' thinks Rita, 'This vault of hope and desire, love and sadness?' 'Oh yes, the sky is what gets split first.' Throughout the novel, the sky – in German 'Himmel' means both 'sky' and 'heaven' – stands for aspirations, and ideals, for what a society strives to be. The divided heaven: two separate and separated political structures, two irreconcilable ways of organizing hopes and desires. A couple that should be together, growing apart.

Christa Wolf, like her heroine Rita, decided to stay in the East. As a famous writer she was comparatively well treated and allowed to travel. And although she did criticize the regime, and her works were censored, she retained an abiding loyalty to the state's ideals, or at least to what she hoped it might achieve. Her faith in the regime was stretched, but she remained, and she remained committed.

On 23 May 1949 the Western sectors of Germany, occupied by the US, the UK and France, were merged to form the Federal Republic of Germany; and a few months later, on 7 October 1949, the Soviet zone became the German Democratic Republic, or GDR (see Map p. 501). At first, movement between the two Germanys was relatively easy. But the relative poverty of East Germany, partly the result of war reparations, led more and more citizens towards *Republikflucht* (flight from the Republic) to West Germany, where economic opportunities and political freedoms seemed – and were – much greater. After 1952, the GDR monitored the border severely but in spite of the growing risks of arrest and capture, somewhere around 200,000 people still managed to escape every year. By 1961 around 3.5 million East Germans had left, approximately 20 per cent of the entire GDR.



population, with serious economic consequences. In response to that mass emigration, the GDR sealed the Inner German Border, and then, on the night of 12–13 August 1961, East German soldiers began erecting the Berlin Wall, which prevented anyone from escaping. From the beginning, the policy was brutal: during its construction, soldiers stood in front of it with orders to shoot anyone who attempted to defect.

GDR authorities officially referred to the Wall as the 'Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart' (*Antifaschistischer Schutzwall*), implying, quite justifiably, that neighbouring West Germany had not been fully de-Nazified. Whatever it was called, the Wall did its job. Between 1961 and 1989, it prevented almost all emigration from East to West. The haemorrhage of skilled workers stopped, and the GDR economy stabilized, for a time. But although most accepted the Wall as impenetrable and insurmountable, during its existence around 5,000 people managed to escape over, under or around it, with an estimated death toll of around 100 in the Berlin area alone.

A hundred or so miles north of Berlin was another favoured route for attempted escapes to the West: the Baltic. Made of bright blue synthetic fibre, armless, trimmed with white zips on the front and legs, the wetsuit pictured opposite would fit a man around six feet tall. Although it is now over twenty-five years old and housed in the German Historical Museum in Berlin, it looks as though it has never been worn. Dr Regine Falkenberg, a curator at the museum, takes up the story:

'After 1961, 5,609 citizens of the GDR attempted to escape via the Baltic Sea. Only 913 reached West Germany, Denmark or Sweden. 174 died from exhaustion or hypothermia, or drowned at sea. 4,522 would-be escapers served prison sentences of many months. Among them was the owner of this wetsuit. The suit, and another just like it, belonged to two young men, two friends from Leipzig. In November 1987 they planned

The wetsuit used in an escape attempt from East to West Germany, November 1987



to paddle an inflatable rubber dinghy – painted black, to make it invisible – from Boltenhagen, a seaside resort about thirty kilometres east of Lübeck, to the West. They hoped that their tightly fitting wetsuits would protect them from hypothermia. Both of them were arrested before they even got into the boat. In March 1988 they were convicted by the District Court in Leipzig of “an aggravated case” of attempted illegal crossing of the frontier, and sentenced to eighteen months in prison. The older man, thirty-five, was recently divorced and eager for a new life in the West.⁷

For Dr Falkenberg, one of the most challenging tasks in establishing the history behind objects like this is deciphering the official records of the GDR:

‘The difficulty in presenting or explaining a totalitarian state like the GDR is that the written records are there, but they are deliberately devious, concealing and banal. The great difficulty for the historian now is to go behind the seemingly inoffensive words, to discover the cruelty and oppression of a totalitarian state, and that is what is so difficult. The surface looks very calm, very clear, very positive. But the words are designed to mislead. So how, using the things and the words of the time, do we recover the reality of an oppressive totalitarian state?’

Yet the wetsuit itself is unambiguous evidence that two men in 1987 concluded that living in the GDR was so unfulfilling it was worth risking death to leave it. There is something unbearably poignant about it. It is not just that it was never used, or that it speaks of high hopes dashed. It is made of such poor, cheap fabric, absurdly inadequate for a November Baltic night. Had they not been so amateur in their planning as to get themselves arrested while still on shore, they might well have died of cold, or drowned – or been shot – once they put to sea. They could easily have wound up as two more names on small white crosses. And, of course, most poignant of all, had they waited just another two

years, they could peacefully and legally have strolled to the West through the Brandenburg Gate.

Between 1961 and 1989 some citizens of the GDR were officially permitted to travel to the West – above all the politically sound, or those whose family ties would ensure their return, and the old (who were regarded as a burden on the economy: it did not matter whether they came back or not). From the 1970s an agreement between the four occupying powers in Berlin made it slightly easier for West Germans to visit the East. But the process was never simple, and for East Berliners the West remained as remote as ever. The building of the Berlin Wall had made it physically impossible for most people to move from one half of their city to another, but some contact did necessarily continue, not least because since the late nineteenth century the transport system of the city had been devised on the basis of one integrated space, not two divided halves. The underground systems and the overground rail systems intersected, above all at the Friedrichstrasse Station, and it was this station that most German people

Friedrichstrasse Station, 1956



had to use, to cross from one side to the other. The process was meticulously controlled and governed, particularly on the Eastern side, by a determination to prevent escape and an equal determination to keep a very close eye on those who were allowed to come in. The experience of leaving or entering East Berlin through the Friedrichstrasse Station was for a whole generation of Germans an unforgettable and distressing emotional experience. The Friedrichstrasse Station was known throughout Germany as the *Tränenpalast*, the Palace of Tears.

The best way to understand how that process of crossing the border was devised and controlled is by looking at a model of the station which is now in the German Historical Museum. Dr Sabine Beneke, a curator at the museum, explains how the station worked.

'I made the journey from West to East Berlin several times. You always had to change twenty Deutschmark into Ostmark, the so-called *Zwangsumtausch* – the compulsory exchange – which every person who went from West to East had to do. Normally I took the way by the Friedrichstrasse. You can see clearly on the model that the station was constructed in a deliberately complex way. The spaces are divided up by very tall walls to give the effect of a labyrinth. There was no clear orientation. You can see the different train tracks were completely separated, so tracks which operated within the East German side were kept separate from those which ran through to the West German side or beyond. As you moved from the train to the exit, you kept having to change direction and change level. You went into small doors and then large spaces, then small spaces, and everywhere in the model you can see the high windows in which observation agents or cameras were placed. Inside the interview cabin you can see the mirrors at ceiling level, so that the person looking at your documents could see your back. You were always being watched by people whom you could not see. You were being monitored at every stage. It was really threatening. This model was made, we think, for the training of Stasi staff, which had a training headquarters here. If



Model of the transit area between West and East Berlin, Friedrichstrasse Station, 1970

you turn it around, at the back of the model you can see there is a key and some buttons. One set of buttons, for example, illuminate lamps, which simulate an alarm. So the Stasi could instruct its trainees on what to do should somebody try to leave the GDR illegally.'

This intriguing cross between a model railway and a doll's house is doubly disturbing because it looks at first sight like a plaything. It takes some time to realize that it has a very grown-up purpose: to train border guards in their duties. Particularly striking are the wires suspended between beams, holding video cameras, so that everything that happens on the platforms can be watched. There is a complex warren of dividers, walls, changing directions, changing spaces, with cabins for individual interrogation, and with mirrors at high levels, so that the traveller is observed at every stage; confused about where they are going, uncertain about what the next space will be, or how far they have got in the process. As an exercise in disorientation, this would be hard to beat. As a way of watching people move under stress and with fear, it has probably never been bettered. This is a surveillance state at the top of its game. Nobody who came through this station forgot the experience.

To police the frontiers, it was not enough to observe people as they left, or prepared to escape. *Republikflucht* was ideally to be anticipated and prevented long before it could come to an attempted crossing. In the 1980s, as the economic gap between East and West widened, the number of attempted illegal emigrations rose steadily. Dr Regine Falkenberg explains how the Stasi responded:

'As the number of attempts rose – from 2,200 in 1985 to 3,700 in 1986 – a separate section of the Stasi was set up to deal with spectacular escape attempts, like trying to penetrate the border barriers by force, trying to fly with improvised aircraft, and all sorts of boats. Between 1987 and 1988 the number of people trying to emigrate continued to rise,

and the Stasi increased its supervision of "suspect" categories, especially people between eighteen and thirty-five who were unmarried, divorced men, or people who had unsuccessfully applied for emigration. One part of the Stasi focused on collecting flying machines of various sorts, and then from the beginning of 1989 there was a permanent exhibition, used for training purposes, of objects and materials used to prepare illegal frontier crossings. That is why we now have the wetsuits. They and the rubber dinghy used in the escape attempt were transferred to the Volkspolizei – the GDR police in Leipzig – and then transferred to the Ministry for State Security [Stasi] in Berlin.

'The Stasi collected these objects firstly to understand how they had been made, what kind of materials had been acquired, and what kind of skills were needed to put them together. The aim was to make sure that their informants and their colleagues understood what was going on, what kinds of attempts to escape were being made, with what kinds of objects, so that they could watch who was buying what kind of material, what quantities of rubber, what kind of books about aeronautics, and so on. Objects like this wetsuit served a didactic purpose: they let the Stasi informants know what they needed to look out for, as other citizens prepared criminally to escape.'

Both wetsuit and model tell not only of the distress and danger attendant on any attempt, legal or illegal, to leave the GDR; both became training devices to develop the Stasi's capacity to spy on the citizen, and to sharpen the observations of its network of hundreds of thousands of informants. It has been reckoned that one in three GDR citizens was involved in giving information to the Stasi about their colleagues and neighbours, and sometimes their families.

The experience of that stifling nexus of spying is the subject of Christa Wolf's 1979 novella, *Was Bleibt* (*What Remains*). It is an account of a day in the life of a writer who knows she is under surveillance: men sit in cars parked outside the house; she is followed and watched; the phone is tapped. The stress and distress



Christa Wolf at her writing desk in the 1980s

that this causes are carefully catalogued, along with the moments of despair and paranoia, above all the frustration of not knowing who is doing this, having no person with whom to hold even a hostile dialogue. The removal of this apparatus of oppression was one of the first gains of reunification. But the memory of it has profoundly shaped key aspects of modern Germany.

The memory of all-pervasive Stasi observation, combined with earlier memories of Nazi spying, has made Germans from both East and West uniquely vigilant – and vigorous – in their refusal to authorize their state to observe their movements without specific parliamentary authority and oversight. Visiting the Friedrichstrasse Station today, there is no sense of the labyrinth of disorientation and constant observation that made it for nearly thirty years so intimidating. Nothing in the shopping malls and coffee bars would now give any clue as to why this complex was long known as the Palace of Tears. As the commuters bustle and push, carrying their drinks and snacks, one could, again, be in

London or Paris. But whereas on the banks of the Spree it is the presence of the white crosses which declares that this must be Berlin, here it is an absence. Nowhere – not on the platforms, nor hanging from the roof, nor on kiosks or pylons – can a surveillance camera be seen. This station is definitely not in Britain.

The power of the memory of surveillance was also strikingly demonstrated in the different responses of the UK and German governments to Edward Snowden's revelations from June 2013 of US engagement in surveillance and information-gathering, even from its closest allies. Whereas in Britain the official reaction was generally hostile or dismissive, in Germany Snowden's claim that he wanted merely 'to inform the public as to that which is done in their name and that which is done against them' was taken seriously and attracted much public support. In the Rhineland city of Mainz, for example, a model of Snowden was the heroic figure on a float pulled through the streets on *Rosenmontag*, the carnival held just before Lent, where political themes are often

The Snowden carnival wagon 'Der Aufdecker' ('The Uncoverer'), Mainz, March 2014



addressed or satirized. The admiration for Snowden was clear and vociferous. And in the Bundestag, speaking on 29 January 2014, Chancellor Merkel articulated to the assembled Members of the Bundestag the seriousness with which such questions must be considered:

'The possibility of total digital surveillance touches the essence of our life. It is thus an ethical task that goes far beyond the politics of security. Millions of people who live in undemocratic states are watching very closely how the world's democracies react to threats to their security: whether they act circumspectly, in sovereign self-assurance, or undermine precisely what in the eyes of these millions of people makes them so attractive – freedom and the dignity of the individual.'

Perhaps only a German political leader, and one brought up in the GDR, could have put that argument with such conviction.

The debate about Stasi surveillance, and the huge numbers of those complicit in it, is still very much alive. And it brings us back to Christa Wolf, with whose *Divided Heaven* this chapter began. That book, published in 1963, is remarkably open about the shortcomings of the GDR, the gap between high ideals and daily compromises and evasions. Wolf's later memoir about the destabilizing experience of being under surveillance, *Was Bleibt* (*What Remains*), was written in 1979. She did not, however, publish it until 1990, after the Wall had fallen. Its appearance then caused a literary storm. Critics, mostly from West Germany, accused her of cowardice or worse for not publishing it while the GDR and the Stasi were still in power, when its appearance might have done something to limit the abuses of the state. Instead, they alleged, she had chosen to remain silent – complicit – while enjoying the privileges granted to her as an internationally celebrated author, licensed to make mild criticisms of the regime.

There was worse to come. Having spoken, and indeed written, about her dislike and disapproval of the GDR state surveillance

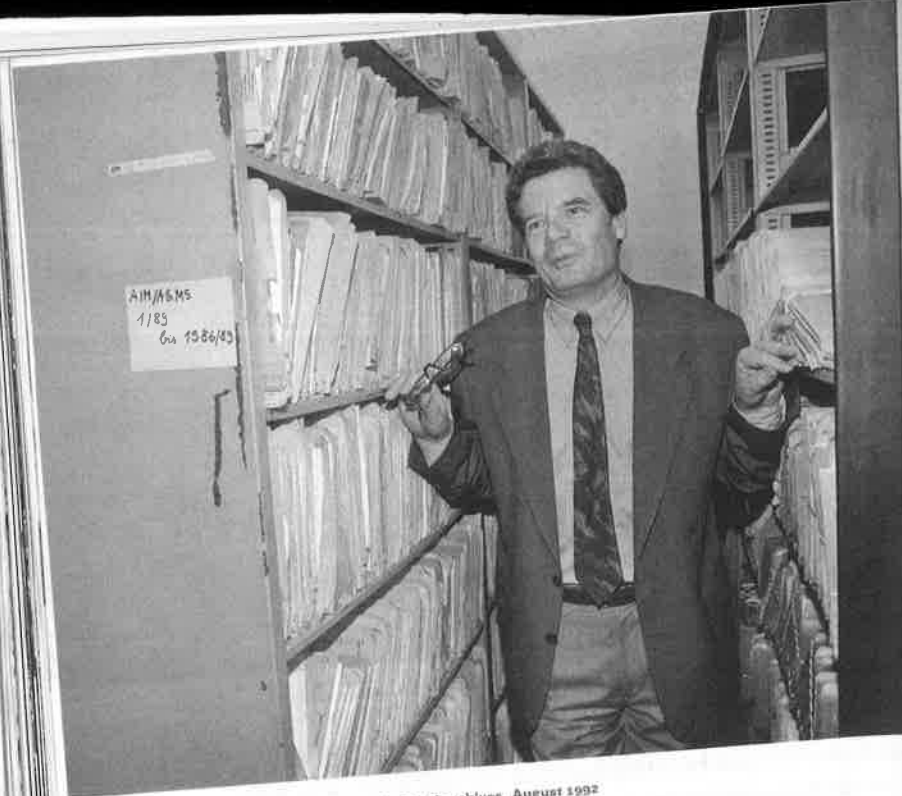


Angela Merkel speaking in the Bundestag about digital surveillance, 29 January 2014

system, in the early 1990s Wolf began studying the forty-two volumes that the Stasi had compiled about her and which were now open to inspection in the state archives. There, to her great surprise and even greater dismay, she discovered a number of reports that she herself had delivered to the Stasi between 1959 and 1961. She had been an informant, part of that great network of citizens reporting on each other to the authorities. She had had meetings with Stasi agents. And she had forgotten about it completely.

Again attacked for hypocrisy and complicity with the GDR regime, Wolf explored the incident at length in her *City of the Angels*, a book she wrote while on a fellowship at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. She concluded that her contacts with the Stasi agents were short and insignificant. And she could see that her few reports to them were so banal that they must have lost interest in her. After 1961, and the building of the Wall, there was no more contact.

Yet she does not let herself off the hook. The real question, she



Joachim Gauck in the Stasi archives, August 1992

argued, was not about her actions. It was about her forgetting. How could she have suppressed that memory so totally as to have forgotten it? How could she have been so gullible, so willing to defer to authority? She concluded that deference, the desire to support the state in whatever way was asked, was a legacy of her childhood under the Nazis. She, like so many of her generation, had been conditioned to conform. Her mind's ability to suppress the shameful memory she could only acknowledge, not excuse.

It is easy to judge Wolf's prose: she writes with a rare lucidity and integrity, and there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of her recollections. It is much harder to come to any decided view on the other issues. The story of Christa Wolf shows, in acute and disconcerting relief, one of the key problems of modern history in Germany. It is a commonplace for all of us that some memories

are so painful, so shameful, that we will suppress them, and the act of recovering them will disorient and distress. The case of this one writer exemplifies why so many of the huge questions surrounding the Holocaust, and the role in it of so many Germans as perpetrators, went until the 1990s not just unanswered, but unasked. And it gives a very sharp edge to the decision by the German government over the last decades to force remembering by researching archives, by introducing vigorous programmes of public education, and by the building of monuments like the Holocaust Memorial. It is no coincidence that Joachim Gauck, who, after reunification, led the commission inquiring into the Stasi records, is now the head of state, President of the Federal Republic. The debate about memory in Germany is as much about what is not remembered as what is. Many countries, reviewing their wars, failures and losses, invoke the rubric 'Lest we forget'. It is a phrase that today has perhaps a deeper resonance in Germany than anywhere else.

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