

I got the following article, some of which I hope matches your own experience, published in our local newspaper as a Community Perspective our local name for a guest editorial. It was published today, Sunday November 24 Thanks to all of you who enriched this wonder we had together. It is as unforgettable as ever to me, and it still bears fairly good fruit, as I hope this demonstrates. Let's keep supporting the concept of scholarly exchange. It's value is ever increasing.

The Past and Future Security Agency

No one knows what the future will bring. But the past holds much insight and provides great signals to those who are mindful of it. As we hover on the eve of creating a new monolithic bureaucracy for the alleged purpose of securing the Homeland, the past is worth a look. A special perspective I'd like to offer is the East German Stasi experience, the dark era of the most forbidding state security force of the postwar twentieth century.

Because I am an American, I have great privileges and opportunities. I can do things like travel to the former East Germany with scholars and dig into the archives of the Stasi, and I did this in the summer of 1999. It was ten years after the Berlin Wall came down, and Germany was re-emerging, reclaiming its pre-war capitol, Berlin, and celebrating a new position in the world. But there it was: Stasi headquarters. A brooding horrific building, ten stories or more high, dark, full of complex hallways and file rooms, interrogation chambers, work stations. A month after the wall came down, East German citizens stormed the Stasi headquarters and occupied it, to keep the former employees from shredding all the documents. What these amazingly brave Germans saved was the opportunity for the rest of the world to see what really can happen to people who live in fearful isolation from realities the rest of us take for granted.

In the Stasi basement were samples of human scent cloths, taken from people under interrogation and sealed in canning jars, so that these people could be located by tracking dogs from their own archived smells, saved for their manhunts. If they disappeared for some reason, they could be hunted down by, and like dogs. The headquarters contains 111 miles of files. Let me just repeat that for proper emphasis: One hundred eleven miles of files. The filing system was so complex, cumbersome, and labyrinthine that ultimately, the West German Government brought back the original employees (and there were 90,000 of them), to enable the people of the Former DDR and the world to open wide the forty years of secret, police state archives.

Experiencing this history was without question the most chilling experience of my life. The international espionage connection, the desires of other national security agencies to study these archives and evaluate the German system, is itself very telling. Chileans were interested, South Africans. And of course the United States and the Russians.

What did they put into their files? What did they feel was important enough to snitch on their countrymen about? How valuable is the information? A riveting and superb book aptly entitled, *The File*, by Timothy Garton Ash, is the story of a young British college student's search for, and unveiling of his Stasi file. He traveled regularly from west to east and back, and spoke with university intellectuals and historians on both sides of the Berlin wall. When the wall came down, any citizen who wanted to know if they had a file was encouraged to seek it out. Timothy Garton Ash did, found his file, sought out the collaborators who were paid to inform about him and wrote the story in this book.

What he found out is worth knowing, particularly in light of our nation's intent to create the 170,000 person Homeland Security superagency. He found that the files are regularly more than half wrong! More than half the information is simply fabricated: it is disinformation! Why is this so? It is really quite logical. If informants are paid to inform, it is better to give any information, even if it is wrong, than to appear as though you've not been on the job. I'd say there's a good chance that most of the so-called intelligence that spy agencies have is of this quality.

So why did I tell you all this? Because we are repeating history with the Homeland Security agency. We're destroying the Bill of Rights, in case anyone has not checked lately. Those rights need more than ever to be on everyone's reading and understanding list.

This whole approach to America's Homeland security is worrisome and unpromising. History is worth study and heed. What I fear most is that we are so preoccupied with that same fear and paranoia that clouded the view of East Germany, that we can't see that we're heading for a dismal future. I for one know all I ever care to know about what lies down the Stasi path.

Rich Seifert
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Professor, University of Alaska Fairbanks