The Stasi was established on 8 February 1950, just four months after the foundation of the German Democratic Republic itself. Formally named the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (MfS), the organization was a political construct, tied solely to the will of the ruling Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or SED). Because the SED considered any opposition treasonous, its suppression became a matter of state security. When the SED officially informed the people about the formation of the Stasi, it called it a “defensive measure” in the Cold War with the West. Its duties were only vaguely defined, yet it was obvious that there were no legal restrictions on its activities. In essence, the Stasi was a combination of domestic secret police and a foreign intelligence service in one agency. Because of this combination, the Stasi was as interested in the activities of its own citizens as it was in potential foreign spies.

Information flowed from the local level to the centre. At the lowest level, district offices cooperated with the first secretaries of the SED district executives. From there, information was passed to provincial administrations and then on to the MfS headquarters in Berlin. The final transfer of information from the MfS to the highest organ of the party, the Politbüro, occurred through Erich Mielke, a member of the Central Committee of the SED from 1950, of the Volkskammer (the “People's Chamber”, the GDR's “legislature”) from 1958, and of the Politbüro from 1976. This extensive network of information transfer functioned to keep the party comprehensively informed about any subversive activity.

The power of the Stasi steadily increased. Its duties went beyond mere information-gathering to playing an active role in controlling the GDR's citizens, sometimes by physical force. Following the suppression of the workers' uprising that broke
out mainly in East Berlin, but also in other cities, in June 1953, the Stasi focused on restricting freedom of expression. As David Childs and Richard Popplewell put it in their study of the Stasi (p.63):

The pervasiveness of the security organs served to prevent public expression of any thought hostile to the SED line. The very knowledge that they were there and watching served to atomize society, preventing independent discussion in all but the smallest groups.

The Stasi’s full-time employees, all of whom had military titles, numbered around 100,000 by 1989. The ministry was divided into departments that were responsible for surveying and controlling GDR nationals, as well as for gathering information about the activities of other countries. In relation to censorship, the Stasi’s duties were covert. In an effort to control the information to which ordinary citizens had access, the Stasi paid particular attention to the cultural sector. Initially, a working group (Arbeitsgruppe) carried out the surveillance of writers and artists, but eventually the Stasi established a main department (Hauptabteilung) devoted solely to this part of the population. Ultimately, cultural institutions fell under the surveillance of Main Department XX, which was responsible for opposing political underground activity and “political-ideological diversion”.

Censorship occurred in various ways. As a division of Main Department II (counterespionage), Department M supervised the GDR’s postal system. Postal censorship involved opening mail, often copying the contents, and then returning it to the postal delivery system. It has been estimated that some 5–5 per cent of letters never reached their intended addressees.

From 1950 until 1964, the Stasi’s concern with literary production was not very great. It increased somewhat in 1957, following the uprising in Hungary the previous year, and the arrest in East Germany itself of Walter Janka, director of the Aufbau Verlag, and Wolfgang Harich, a philosopher and social theorist. Both men supported reforms aimed at securing a more democratic and liberalized political and economic system. Some critical writers have traced Stasi surveillance back to this time. An increased interest in writers and literature developed in 1961, following the construction of the Berlin Wall, and in the spring of 1964 the Main Department (Hauptabteilung XX) was established. Heeding the warning of the “Prague Spring”, which units from East Germany took part in suppressing, Department Seven within Main Department XX was established in late 1969. This department was solely responsible for the control of cultural institutions and the implementation of the cultural policies of the SED.

Essential to the information-gathering system of the Stasi was the network of unofficial operatives (Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter, or IM), who infiltrated both private and social spheres. Many of the employees of publishing houses, such as the readers who evaluated manuscripts, worked as IM. The IM all received codenames and their identities were seldom known to others. In this way, the party was always kept well-informed about the activities of writers. After protests erupted against the expatriation of Wolf Biermann, in 1976, the Stasi requested that the Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel (Administrative Authority for Publishing and the Book Trade) maintain dossiers on those writers who had signed the protest petition. Publishing houses were asked to gather information about the extent of the writers’ dissatisfaction with the GDR’s cultural policy, as well as to learn about any further intended protests. From their knowledge of writers’ activities, the Stasi could make sure that those who were out of line did not obtain contracts for their work. The publishing ban applied to the nonconformist writers active in the Prenzlauer Berg section of East Berlin during the 1980s was a case in point.

Following the collapse of the GDR, the unified German state took control of the Stasi’s archives, appointing Joachim Gauck to run a special department responsible for all files that dealt with individuals. One case in particular will illustrate what sort of materials they contain. In 1978, Günter Kunert (1929–), a writer in East Germany, published a volume of poetry entitled Unterwegs nach Utopia (Along the Path to Utopia) in West Germany. In July 1977, Kunert had presented a similar collection for publication in East Germany. After extensive debate and some changes to the original manuscript, the Aufbau publishing house was able to print the volume in 1980. Following unification, Kunert studied the surveillance file that had been maintained on him. He discovered a review of the western edition of Unterwegs nach Utopia in which “Im Uwe” wrote that more than one third of the poems in the volume contained hateful attacks on the GDR, the party, and its leaders. “Uwe” described Kunert as an “enemy of socialism”, attacked the quality of individual poems, and asserted that the poems could have no place in the literary traditions of the GDR, and should therefore not be published there.

Three major events took place in the arena of German literature following the fall of the Berlin Wall that have served to alter all previous assumptions about the literature of the GDR. The first, the controversy over Christa Wolf’s story “Was bleibt” (“What Remains”), is discussed in the entry devoted to her. Second, in 1991, Sascha Anderson and Rainer Schedlinski were uncovered as former Stasi agents. Anderson had been one of the leading voices of the Prenzlauer Berg, the centre of alternative literature and culture in Berlin during the 1980s. Many asked how such literature could provide an alternative to state-sanctioned literature, if the state security system had a voice in it, and speculated on Anderson and Schedlinski’s motives for giving the Stasi damaging evidence about their friends and contemporaries. Since there could hardly have been any ideological basis for collaboration by the 1980s, did their cooperation arise merely out of a desire for personal gain? Others argued that, in any case, the Prenzlauer Berg movement had been too large and too complex to be wholly controlled by just these two writers, and was not to be seen as discredited because of them. Finally, in 1993, it was revealed that two of the most admired writers of the older generation, Christa Wolf and Heiner Müller, had cooperated with the Stasi. Because of her prominence and world renown, the exposure of Christa Wolf was a devastating blow to the credibility of the GDR’s literature in general. It has been argued that Wolf and Müller collaborated with the Stasi, at least in the earlier years of the GDR, out of a sense of ideological conviction, and a desire to help create and solidify the beliefs of the newly emerging socialist state.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, many writers and scholars have painstakingly researched the role of the Stasi in literary
circles. In the words of David Bathrick, the project they are engaged in amounts to

reconstructing and claiming one’s history; the nature of complicity, control, and dissent in the processes of everyday GDR life; the search for new and different norms of morality and value; and confronting the twin legacies of fascism and Stalinism.

**Carol Anne Costabile-Heming**

**Further Reading**

Anz, Thomas (editor), *"Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf": Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland*, Munich: Spangenberg, 1991


Henke, Klaus-Dietmar and Roger Engelmann (editors), *Aktenlage: Die Bedeutung der Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes für die Zeitgeschichtsforschung*, Berlin: Links, 1995


