



ABOUT THE FILM

The Lives of Others, directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, focuses on the cultural scene in East Berlin during the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the middle of the 1980s. It illuminates the corrupt system during the communist regime of the GDR. It was a regime which was characterised by espionage and inhumane and morally doubtful acts.

In the film, the Stasi commissar Gerd Wiesler, a faithful supporter of the totalitarian regime, has been instructed to observe the popular artistic couple Christa-Maria Sieland and Georg Dreyman who work at a theatre and devote their life to cultural and intellectual exchange. By eavesdropping on the couple, Wiesler penetrates into the lives of the 'others'. Suddenly the loyal communist is faced with a forbidden and for him inaccessible world – a world full of free spirit, passion, challenge and diversity.

Much of the film was shot on location in East Berlin in the original settings, for example, at the former Stasi prison 'Hohenschönhausen' (which is now a memorial place for the victims of the communist tyranny in Germany) and at the former Ministry of State Security. The location shots of Dreyman's apartment were filmed on Wedekindstrasse in Berlin-Friedrichshain.

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HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Potsdam Conference

The Potsdam Conference was held at Cecilienhof in Potsdam, Germany, from July 17 to August 2, 1945. The participants at this conference were the Soviet Union (represented by Communist Party General Secretary Joseph Stalin), the United Kingdom (represented by Prime Minister Winston Churchill and later Clement Attlee) and the United States (represented by President Harry S. Truman). These were the three largest and most powerful of the victorious Allies that defeated the Axis Powers in World War II.

In order to reduce the risk that Germany could threaten world peace once more the main agreements of this conference were:

1. The entire disarmament and 'denazification' of Germany.
2. The stabilisation of life by introducing democratic and constitutional values.
3. The decentralisation of the German economic system and administration, in order to spread power.

As a consequence of their totally different and opposing political systems, the Soviet Union and the United States were given separate areas of responsibility, splitting Germany into two different parts. The Soviet Union was responsible for enforcing the agreement of the Potsdam Conference in the eastern part of Germany; the United States, Great Britain and France had control over the western part of Germany, with the aim of bringing stabilisation into civil life. Thus, the eastern part of Germany was by now occupied by the Soviets and the western part was occupied by the Western powers. The German capital, Berlin, which lay on the border between East and West Germany, was in the legally exceptional position of having a 'four-power-government' as it was divided into four different sectors, with each sector governed by a different state (the Soviet Union, the USA, the UK and France).

THE COLD WAR

At the end of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union were the two great emerging world powers. The United States disapproved of the Soviet Union's actions in Middle and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union felt threatened by the expansively emerging capitalism of the United States. As the eastern powers distanced themselves from the West, Churchill famously described this situation as an 'iron curtain' between the Soviet and the American spheres of influence. By now the strategy of the United States existed in a 'politic of containment', aiming to limit the influence of Communist Soviet Union as much as possible.

The Cold War profoundly affected the defeated and occupied Germany. Although its entire civil life, economic situation and infrastructure were in disarray, Germany was still an important strategic point in Europe. Whereas the Soviets interpreted the American proposal to unite the different zones of occupation economically as 'American economic imperialism', the United States were afraid of the Soviet Union trying to secure all Germany under the communist sphere of influence. As a consequence, a continuous power struggle began between the Soviet Union and the United States.

THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

The German Democratic Republic (GDR/‘Deutsche Demokratische Republik’, or just DDR) was established in the Soviet occupation zone of Germany on October 7, 1949 as a reaction to the creation of the ‘Federal Republic of Germany’ (FRG/‘Bundesrepublik Deutschland’) – the so-called ‘West Germany’ – which was created in May 1949 and governed by the United States, Britain and France.

The GDR was a communist state which existed from 1949 to 1990. Despite the fact that Berlin was officially a ‘four-power-government’ (occupied by the Soviet Union, the United States, Britain and France) it was claimed as the GDR’s capital.

THE BERLIN WALL

The Berlin Wall was a part of the border dividing West Berlin from East Berlin and the surrounding areas from August 13, 1961 to when the border was finally opened on November 9, 1989. It was also the most prominent part of the GDR border system. Many lost their lives or were arrested in their attempts to cross the well-guarded wall.

Because of the opposing political systems of the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union and its allies the occupied Germany became in a way the political scene of the Cold War. Thus, the Berlin Wall (‘Berliner Mauer’) became the iconic symbol of the Cold War and the Iron Curtain between the United States and the Soviet Union.

THE STASI

The Stasi (‘Ministerium für Staatssicherheit’/Ministry of State Security) was the domestic and foreign intelligence body, the secret police and the official investigation organisation of the GDR. It was founded by the Communist party SED on February 8, 1950 in order to protect and enforce the interests of the party. The Stasi became the ‘Schild und Schwert der Partei’ (Shield and Sword of the Party) of the SED.

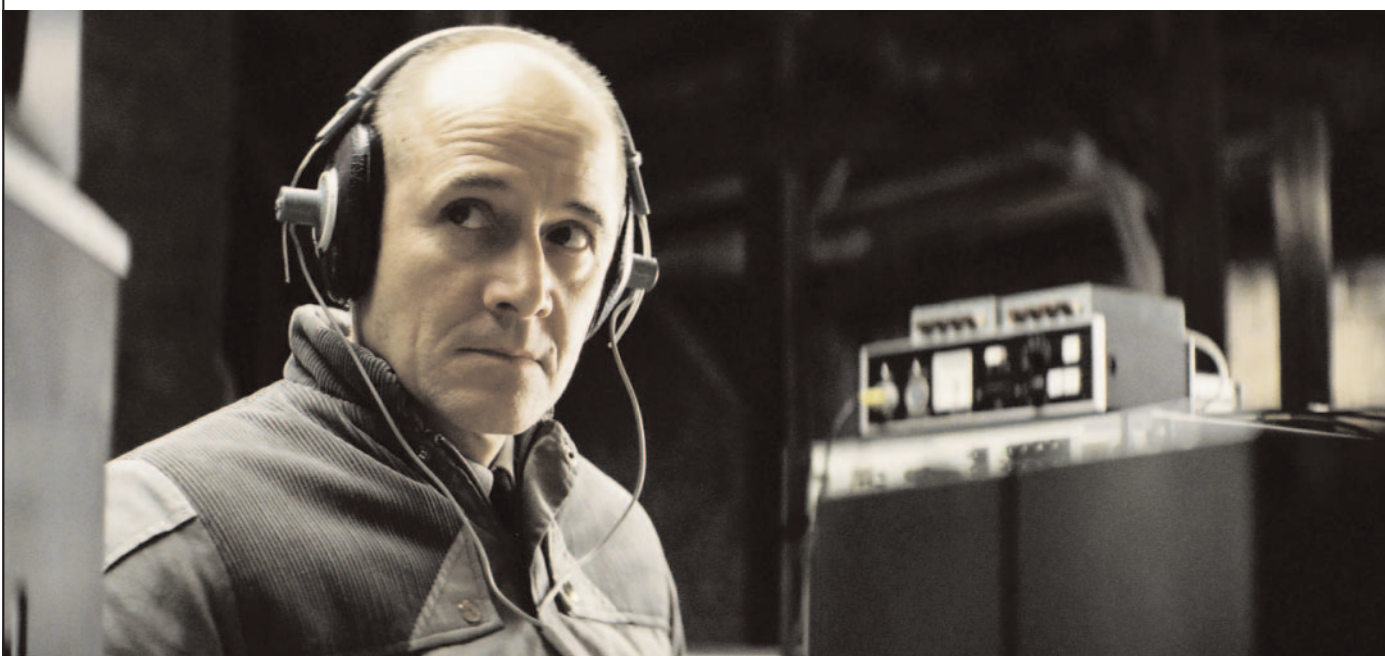
The main duty of the Stasi was to eliminate any political beliefs which opposed Communist ideology, to arrange political operations (‘Operativer Vorgang’) against opposing powers and to detect politically unacceptable behaviour among the citizens of East Germany. In order to get as much information as possible and to expose people who had thoughts and opinions that were critical of the regime, the Stasi spied on people and many households were bugged. The Stasi also used heavy-handed methods such as intimidation and blackmailing in order to demonstrate power and to make it clear that an adversarial attitude against the GDR would result in serious consequences (arrest, expulsion from country, fines, etc.).

Key questions:

- Consider how totalitarian states demonstrate power and authority towards every single person.
- Consider the consequences of a lack of humanity and morals in totalitarian regimes. What happens to personal freedom and human rights?

- In which countries do these circumstances exist now?
- What happens to the human need for privacy and intimacy when espionage is a common instrument? How might people feel if they can't be sure if they are ever in safe surroundings?
- Which consequences of the totalitarian state can be seen in the film *The Lives of Others*?
- Why do the ideas of communism and socialism and the idea of self-realisation and individuality conflict with each other?

FILM STUDY – CHARACTER ANALYSIS



The changing behaviour of Gerd Wiesler is essential to the narrative progression of this film. There are several key scenes that we can consider in relation to Wiesler's character development.

OPENING SEQUENCE

We first meet Wiesler giving a lecture on methods of interrogation. It is established here how he feels about the rules of the Stasi and how he operates within this system. One of the students remarks that the methods being advocated by Wiesler are inhumane. Wiesler's response is to mark the student: we see him putting a blue cross on the seating plan.

Key questions:

- From this opening sequence, what kind of man does Wiesler seem to be? How would you describe him?
- What kinds of actions and behaviours are you expecting as a result?
- How is this information conveyed to us?

Think about the camerawork, body language and interactions with other characters in your response.

As the surveillance operation continues we meet another agent, and this interaction again confirms the character information about Wiesler that we have seen in the opening scene. Consider the behaviour of this other agent in contrast with Wiesler.

Key questions:

- How do these meetings confirm character information about Wiesler?
- How do Wiesler's surroundings contrast with Georg and Christa-Maria's? For example, think about Christa-Maria's home, and the music that is used with the couple. Be detailed in your response.

NB: these questions relate to clip 1 'Wiesler Discovers Art' and clip 2 'In The Elevator' located at www.filmeducation.org/livesofothers

The surveillance operation he is assigned to creates results that are unexpected; it causes a shift within Wiesler.

Key questions:

- How does Wiesler change?
- Think about his actions from this point on in the film – are they in keeping with the character traits established so far?
- What do you think causes these changes?
- List the main events that occur from this point in the film until the end that indicate the changes in Wiesler. Here are a couple of sequences to get you started.

NB: these questions relate to clip 1 'Wiesler Discovers Art' and clip 2 'In The Elevator' located at www.filmeducation.org/livesofothers

GEORG AND WIESLER

When we first meet these characters we can understand them as opposites. Georg is a radical playwright and Wiesler is a member of the Stasi Party and as such works to police the output of people such as Georg. However by the end of the film we see that these characters have become less polarised, and through Wiesler's actions the two men have an important connection.

Key questions:

- Were you surprised by the ending of the film?
- Did you find it moving?

UNOFFICIAL STAFF WITHIN THE STASI

There were many 'non-official' people working for the Stasi. The so-called 'inoffiziellen Mitarbeiter' ('IM'/non-official staff), colloquially called 'Spitzel' (grass), were recruited and worked secretly for the Stasi. IMs were recruited in order to deliver information from their professional, private and/or their recreational areas of life if the demanded/necessary information was not obtainable officially. The majority of the IMs worked more or less voluntarily together with the Stasi - either because of political belief or because they wanted professional and private benefits. Some IMs were also recruited from people coming from a 'suspicious background'. This method of recruitment came about due to political pressure or by blackmail, as exemplified by the character Christa-Maria Sieland.



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FILM STUDY - METHODS

NB: This section relates to clip 3 'The Stasi In Dreyman's Flat' which can be accessed at www.filmeducation.org/livesofothers

The Wiesler that we meet during the introductory scenes carries out his belief systems to the letter. In keeping with his ideological beliefs the next obvious step for Wiesler is to bug Georg Dreyman's flat. The beginnings of Operation Lazlo are put in place. However, we see here circumstances which demonstrate the power and social control of the Stasi. Wiesler and his men enter the building and begin setting wires and connecting recording equipment. We see the neighbour watching the events from across the hall. The reputation of the Stasi was such that, by having seen something or at least having thought you did, was enough reason to think that you might also be under surveillance.

Key questions:

- Were you shocked by this sequence?
- How was the tension developed? Think about the use of sound and camerawork. What did you find the most significant elements in this sequence?
- Did you find the power exhibited by Wiesler surprising?
- Put yourself in the position of the neighbour. How would you have felt? What would you have done?

THE GDR – A REPRESSIVE AND TOTALITARIAN REGIME

Unjust political conditions and the restriction of personal freedom were the main characteristics of the repressive and totalitarian regime of the GDR. There were no democratic free elections, as the power did not emanate from the people, but instead bogus elections just served to demonstrate the power and dictatorship of the SED party. Democratic and constitutional principles such as the separation of powers, basic rights, the right of free opinion/freedom of speech and the freedom of assembly did not exist.

FILM STUDY - WIESLER AND AUTHORITY

During The Lives of Others we are introduced to the power and authority of the Stasi through the characters of Minister Bruno Hefp and Grubitz (Wiesler's superior). These characters contrast with Wiesler in the ways that they operate and take advantage of the system.

Key questions:

- Think of key moments where these characters use their power to serve their own interests. How do these men contrast with Wiesler?

- Think about their political beliefs: how is this conveyed to us?
- Think about facial expression and the use of narration. What do we see?
- Do we see aspects of the narrative that other characters don't?
- How does this help us to understand the relationship between Wiesler and these characters?

WIESLER AND MISE-EN-SCÈNE

When we first meet Wiesler we see a man that believes in the system in which he operates. His beliefs, and those of the party, are reflected in the simple functional nature of his flat. His home has been carefully constructed to communicate the values of the system that he believes in so passionately.

Key questions:

- How would you describe the apartment?
- As we get to know Wiesler the contrast between his home and Christa-Maria and Georg's becomes more important. How would you describe the contrast? Think carefully about props, lighting and colour in particular.