

- Monday July 13th 2009
- [Home](#)
- [This week's print edition](#)
- [Daily news analysis](#)
- Opinion**
 - [All opinion](#)
 - [Leaders](#)
 - [Letters to the Editor](#)
 - [Blogs](#)
 - [Columns](#)
 - [KAL's cartoons](#)
 - [Correspondent's diary](#)
 - [Economist debates](#)

- World politics**
 - [All world politics](#)
 - [Politics this week](#)
 - [International](#)
 - [United States](#)
 - [The Americas](#)
 - [Asia](#)
 - [Middle East and Africa](#)
 - Europe**
 - [Britain](#)

- Special reports**
- Business and finance**
 - [About our new page](#)
 - [All business and finance](#)
 - [Business this week](#)
 - [Economics focus](#)
 - [Management](#)
 - [Business education](#)
 - [Economics A-Z](#)

- Markets and data**
 - [All markets and data](#)
 - [Daily chart](#)
 - [Weekly indicators](#)
 - [World markets](#)
 - [Currencies](#)
 - [Rankings](#)
 - [Big Mac index](#)

- Science and technology**
 - [About our new page](#)
 - [All science and technology](#)
 - [Technology Quarterly](#)
 - [Technology Monitor](#)

- Books and arts**
 - [All books and arts](#)
 - [Style guide](#)

- People**
 - [People](#)
 - [Obituaries](#)

- Diversions**

- Audio and video**
 - [Audio and video library](#)
 - [Audio edition](#)

- The World In**
 - [The World in 2009](#)
 - [The World in 2008](#)
 - [The World in 2007](#)
 - [The World in 2006](#)
 - [The World in 2005](#)
 - [The World in 2004](#)

- Research tools**
 - [All research tools](#)
 - [Articles by subject](#)
 - [Backgrounders](#)

Your opinion could give you a chance to win \$1000! **TAKE A SURVEY** [Start >>](#)

Survey and chance to win provided by Safecount.net and Dynamic Logic. safecount.net

Europe

German history and the Stasi

The gunshot that hoaxed a generation

May 28th 2009 | BERLIN
 From *The Economist* print edition

The secret of a momentous death



Was his killer a fascist or communist?

AKG THE death of Benno Ohnesorg stirred a whole movement of left-wing protest and violence. On June 2nd 1967 the newly wed student of literature joined a protest in West Berlin against the visiting shah of Iran. As he watched a commotion in the courtyard of a house into which police had chased some demonstrators, he was shot in the back of the head by a policeman, Karl-Heinz Kurras, who claimed he had been threatened by knife-wielding protesters.

This was a turning-point. In the eyes of many young Germans the state had unmasked itself as evil. Many joined what would become the 1968 student movement; some took up arms. "This fascist state wants to kill us all," said Gudrun Ensslin, who went on to become a leader of the Red Army Faction terrorist group and died in prison in 1977.

Had she lived, she would be stunned to learn that Mr Kurras, now 81, had been a long-time agent of East Germany's secret police, the Stasi. Historians trawling through the Stasi's archives stumbled across 17 volumes chronicling Mr Kurras's secret career. It began with an unsolicited visit to the Communist Party's central committee in East Berlin in 1955 and prospered when he joined the state-security section of the West Berlin police. Under the codename "Otto Bohl" he rendered such services as tipping off the Stasi to espionage investigations and locating tunnels used by defectors from the east. Germans, who heard of Mr Kurras's double identity this month, are wondering just how much of their history will have to be re-examined.

There is no evidence that the Stasi ordered him to kill Ohnesorg, though it was not displeased by the tumult that ensued. Would the students who embraced the martyr have blamed the West alone had they known that the bullet was fired by an agent of the East? Would fellow policemen have rallied around Mr Kurras, who was twice acquitted of manslaughter, had they known him to be a communist spy?

Despair over his exoneration helped drive Ensslin and others to violence. Till Meyer, once part of the violent June 2nd Movement and himself a former Stasi agent, told *Der Spiegel*, a magazine,

- [Comment \(18\)](#)
- [Recommend \(65\)](#)
- [E-mail](#)
- [Share](#)
- [Print](#)
- [Reprints & permissions](#)

Related Items

Country briefing
 Germany

Advertisement

The Economist

Get 4 Free Trial Issues and

[CLICK TO SUBSCRIBE](#)

CVBHM Center for Value-Based Health Management

Find out how others are already **driving down costs**

[LEARN MORE NOW](#)

economics A-Z
 Special reports
 Style guide

Country briefings
 All country briefings
 China
 India
 Brazil
 United States
 Russia

My account home

Newsletters and alerts
 Manage my newsletters
 Manage my e-mail alerts
 Manage my RSS feeds
 Manage special-offer alerts
 More »

Print subscriptions
 Subscribe to *The Economist*
 Renew my subscription
 Change my print subscription delivery, billing or e-mail address
 Pay my bill
 Activate premium online access
 Report a missing copy
 Suspend my subscription
 More »

Digital subscriptions
 Subscribe to Economist.com
 Manage my subscription
 Mobile edition
 Audio edition
 Download screensaver
 More »

Classifieds and jobs

The Economist Group
 About the Economist Group
 Economist Intelligence Unit
 Economist Conferences
 Intelligent Life
 CFO
 Roll Call
 European Voice
 EuroFinance
 Reprints and permissions

EIU online store

Economist shop

Advertisement

that history need "not be rewritten a bit". But if people like him had known who Mr Kurras really was, their extremism might have been tempered by uncertainty.

The revelation comes in the midst of an arcane but passionate argument about whether East Germany should be called a *Unrechtsstaat*, "a lawless state". Politicians from the ex-communist Left Party reject the label, angering conservatives. Gesine Schwan, a candidate for the German presidency who lost to the incumbent, Horst Köhler, on May 23rd, heightened the row by saying she found the label too "vague". To win, she would have needed support from the Left Party.

The unmasking of Mr Kurras does not entitle Germans to pin the blame for Ohnesorg's killing on East Germany. But it does remind them that the Stasi was at the heart of the regime's nastiness.

[Back to top ^^](#)

Readers' comments

Readers have commented on this article (the window for new comments is now closed).

[View all comments \(18\)](#)



Want more? Subscribe to [The Economist](#) and get the week's most relevant news and analysis.

Advertisement

Your opinion could give you a chance to win \$1000! TAKE A SURVEY

Survey and chance to win provided by Safecount.net and Dynamic Logic.

safecount.net

Start »

Classified ads

Maximise potential in international trade with RBS - [Read our FREE report](#)

Full-time faculty position
Top graduate school in Lima, Peru searches for Ph.D / DBA graduates from recognized universities.

For more information, [click here](#).

[Manufacturing Excellence Awards 2009](#)

On Thursday we will be celebrating the best that British business has to offer.

[Read more](#) about the UK's premier manufacturing benchmarking scheme and its top 20 firms that have reached the prestigious final.

FSA — PRUDENTIAL POLICY

Associates, Senior Associates & Technical Specialists — Wholesale and Prudential Policy Division

click [here](#) to apply

Amnesty International

[Secretary General](#)

Nottingham University Business School

[Director - Christel DeHaan Tourism & Travel Research Institute](#)

Sponsor's feature

[About sponsorship](#)