

Stasi revelations ^{CO06Z} ^{ca 1992?} force re-examination

By **STEPHEN KINZER**
New York Times News Service

BONN, Germany — The former East German secret police, the Stasi, no longer exists, but last weekend it nonetheless claimed another life.

Gerhard Riege, a member of the Bonn Parliament from eastern Germany, hanged himself on Saturday after it was reported that he had been a Stasi informer in the 1950s.

"I don't have the strength to live and fight," Riege wrote in a suicide note. "I'm afraid of the publicity, the way it will be handled by the media."

Riege's suicide has led some politicians to warn that Stasi files are being opened too soon and too fully. Others insist the country continue to seek the full truth about Stasi repression, no matter how painful.

Under a law approved by Parliament late last year, any citizen may have access to his or her complete Stasi file. Most files contain reports about the person's private life and political views, submitted by informers under code names. Special librarians at the Stasi archives can usually tell the informer's true identity.

Many Stasi victims who have seen their files have discovered that some of their friends, co-workers and even relatives were informers for the secret police.

Private anguish

These discoveries have led to considerable private anguish and the breakup of many friendships. They have also left former Stasi informers deeply embarrassed and, in some cases, overwhelmed with guilt.

The law opening Stasi files, which went into effect Jan. 2, also empowers government agencies to request background checks on their employees. These checks have resulted in the dismissal of thousands of judges, police officers, schoolteachers and other public employees in eastern Germany who once informed for the Stasi.

Since the files were opened, several politicians in eastern Germany have been revealed as long-time Stasi informers. Among the most prominent was Josef Duchac, who was ousted from his post as premier of the state of Thuringia last month after his former Stasi ties were made public.

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Germany's Communist Party since 1946, and in 1990, when it renamed itself the Democratic Socialist party, he remained an important member. Files found by investigators suggest that he had been an informer for the Stasi from 1954 to 1960.

Even before he was officially identified as a Stasi collaborator, Riege had been the target of many rumors. When he tried to give a speech in Parliament last year urging an end to "cultural restrictions" in education, he was interrupted by jeering colleagues.

"Who restricted people? You did!" shouted one. "Stasi lackey!" shouted another. "He's a Stasi brother!"

Like other political parties, the Democratic Socialists recently asked for background checks on all 13 of its Members of Parliament. Party leaders said that three of the 13 were found to have worked for the Stasi.

The party gave all three deputies a vote of confidence, but Riege evidently feared what one friend called "unbearable social pressure."

Another of the three Democratic Socialist deputies identified as former Stasi informers, Jutta Braband, announced this week that she would resign her seat in Parliament.

According to investigators, Braband not only provided reports to the Stasi, but "participated actively in arresting people."

'Stasi hysteria'

Riege's suicide led one member of Parliament, Hermann Scheer, to warn that "Stasi hysteria" was spreading through Germany.

"We are living through a public witch hunt that is unworthy of a democratic state," Scheer said, adding, in a reference to Hitler's brown-shirted storm troopers, "A country that allowed former SA members and Hitler Youth graduates to rise to high government positions has no right to condemn a man like Gerhard Riege because he had contact with the Stasi from the ages of 24 to 30."

Another member of Parliament, Wolfgang Thierse, who was a leader in the campaign to open Stasi files, urged Germans to be tolerant of people revealed to have been Stasi operatives. Life in East Germany, he said, "meant a constant struggle to defend your individuality."

"It is inevitable that this involves compromises, tactics, diplomacy, and yes, mistakes," Thierse said. "We should avoid the impression that everyone was somehow guilty."

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Stasi files have also shaken the German sports world. A member of the Olympic bobsledding team, Harald Czudaj, admitted that he furnished the Stasi with reports on his coaches and teammates. So many soccer players on the Dresden team have admitted to Stasi contacts that the franchise may collapse in the face of public disgust.

Call for tolerance

"Something is wrong with the way we are looking into our past," complained Gregor Gysi, leader of the Democratic Socialist party, in a eulogy delivered at Riege's funeral.

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Rita Suessmuth, president of Parliament, urged citizens to recognize that it was the communist system, not individual informers, that bore the blame for injustice in East Germany.

"In a social and political climate where pre-judgment is taking the place of facts, where the accused and the guilty no longer have a fair chance at a new beginning, there is no way to recognize guilt any more," Suessmuth said in an interview. But she added, "This painful process is unavoidable if we hope to forgive each other and live together freely."

Many Germans are frustrated that while lowly ex-informers are being publicly disgraced, the men who led East Germany seem to be beyond punishment.