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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,

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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.

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