

Basic Reasons for the Effectiveness of the East German Ministry for State Security's Departments M and 26

Nessim Ghouas¹
Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

This paper does not attempt to deal with the systematic functions of departments M and 26 of the East German Ministry for State Security (MfS).² Instead, it will examine the most important aspects of surveillances executed by these departments. We will thus try to systematize the methods of control they used to secure the power of the SED. But although the departments used various means for supporting and securing the SED regime, their different methods served identical purposes: namely, those of monitoring the citizens of East Germany.

The focus will be on the main aspects of the structures and methods of the MfS departments M and 26. Firstly, its structures will be discussed, a topic that I have divided into two sub-points. The first of these sub-points concerns the effective hierarchical function of power in terms of a "horizontal" and "vertical" system.³ The second treats the locked society of the MfS. In regards to methods, I have made three sub-points. These include conspiracy, law-breaking, and fear. The parts of the system described by the two main points and their sub-points practically functioned together in the MfS and were inseparable. These parts will be divided into their own sections below in order to illustrate clearly where they belonged. Where it is relevant, however, other functions will be discussed along with them.

¹ Contact information: Nessim Ghouas, +47 95 14 13 85/+47 98 61 22 20, nessim.ghouas@gmx.net.

² The abbreviation *MfS* refers to the East German security service (known in English as the Ministry for State Security), which existed as an independent ministry of the GDR. Officially, the Ministry's formal name was *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (MfS)*. However, to the Germans both domestic and international, it was better known as *Stasi* (a shortening for *Staatssicherheit*). Even though other names such as *The Firm* have been used to name the Ministry, the abbreviation *MfS* is most common. Departments M and 26 were the departments of the MfS responsible for mail (Department M) and telephone control (Department 26).

³ From the author's perspective, it is legitimate to claim that both a horizontal and vertical system of power had its origin based upon the Central (i.e., the headquarters of the *MfS*), situated in the capital of the GDR (East Berlin). The horizontal power was mainly linked to a complex system of power existing within the Central, while the vertical one has to do with the ADMs. In regards to an ADM (Administrative District Management), the GDR had 15 *Bezirke*. A *Bezirk* was something close to what is known as a German *Bundesland* (Federal State), in English, a district. While a *Bezirk* was the GDR's largest Administrative District (AD), a *Kreis* (also a district, though somewhat smaller) was a subdivision of a *Bezirk*. In contrast to federal Germany's inner states, the East German system did not have the same competence and influence on the central power. The central power in all matters was situated in East Berlin. Apart from that, all the ADs were named after their capitals (Berlin having been somewhat special compared to the others). Therefore, the AD of Rostock had a town called Rostock, which was the political centre of the AD (as of today, this town is situated in the Federal State of Mecklenburg-West Pomerania). In the same way, the MfS was represented in every AD. However, the name of the Ministry's central office was the *Bezirksverwaltung, BV* (Administrative District Management or ADM). The MfS was also present in the political subdivisions of the ADs. In these smaller districts, the MfS called its places *Kreisdienststellen* (District Service Place or DSPs).

1 The most important structures of the MfS

1.1 An effective hierarchy

The MfS was structured in a rather complex way. It seems as if the most important structural condition involved having a clear hierarchy in order to know who was doing what at all times. In terms of the aforementioned horizontal and vertical powers, they were structured in such a way that orders were always given from top to bottom. Once given, these orders were to be followed without any further questioning. The workers were always given an absolute minimum of information, thus making those in the system constantly dependant on authority above. Military principles heavily influenced the system, with few opportunities for improvement or flexibility. With few exceptions, changes were ordered from the top. Therefore, even though the system contained many thousands of workers, each with his or her own special task, only a few men at the top controlled all matters.

Because of this structure, the MfS operated with an enormously complex bureaucracy, beyond the imagination of most. Little chance was given to workers to complete their work in a convenient way. This is not to say that the system of the MfS did not function. Much of its employees' work, however, might have been more easily accomplished had it not been for the way that the system of the MfS was structured. For example, many tasks of departments M and 26 had to be ratified by a higher authority before they were begun. On the one hand, since tasks had to be approved of on the top, the MfS had a rather good overview of any work being done at all times. Power could thus be secured at the top level. On the other hand, there was less power and information given to lower levels. It is also informative to look at the different commands of the leaders of the MfS—whether those in the ADM or the Central—to their workers, some of whom I have spoken with.⁴ These workers were afterwards surprised to see how everything was put together and only recognized their own roles in some details of the whole overall system. Within the "logic" of this system, the ability of "unimportant" workers to influence something through their own efforts was nearly nonexistent. All workers with whom I spoke confirmed that their work was not taken seriously by the top leader of their ADM, since he, after all, was not interested in facing any facts about the system. His reaction was no doubt also connected with fear for his own position, which would have been endangered if he submitted too many negative reports to the Central.

The departments were also overloaded with new tasks and challenges. Because of this overload, the already dominating control of the Central over the district became even more centralized. This resulted in a loss of district power. Furthermore, such centralization resulted in more overload for the subordinates actually doing the work, since they likely could have dealt with their tasks more efficiently had they had the power to do so. It seems somewhat like a system of give-and-take in the way that the overall security for solving tasks was thoroughly considered. Naturally, the MfS wanted to be effective, but not at any price. Consequently, effectiveness may have often been secondary. It was probably considered as more reasonable to have a gigantic system of complex and awkward practical functions intended to accomplish certain tasks, than to have a more flexible system. Although it was no doubt easier to maintain, a more flexible system would have had less focus on preserving secrecy.

⁴ The author has been fortunate enough to have been able to undertake thorough conversations with officers of the MfS over a long period of time.

Without discussing how secrecy was related to the methods of the MfS, it should be mentioned that the strong focus on it made the system more complicated to run. Since the system was largely built upon mistrust, more and more decisions ended up being taken by the Central. The power of the Central as such became even more elitist-dominated, and finally only a few men possessed a complete overview of the control mechanisms of the state. This raises the question as to how effective such a system was after all. According to the logic of the system, one might argue, it automatically had to turn out this way, since the only ones who had full information on nearly all matters were in the Central. It was therefore believed that the decisions made about surveillance could not have been better executed from anywhere other than this particular place. One can argue that in some ways the structure of the system not just made the highest leaders at the Central increase their power over all tasks, but forced them to do so, since the system was built upon a need-to-know principle. This principle meant that the lower the position of a given worker, the less knowledge he had about the meaning of his specific task. Such a structure, combined with the conservative, military system of power, did not allow the system to be flexible or capable of making any quick changes.

Although the social system of the GDR and MfS had its limitations, any command always came from the top to the bottom by way of a well-functioning, hierarchically system of power. To secure absolute power, the MfS also controlled the workers internally. However, it was simply impossible to regulate any "law" on all people. Persons are, after all, different from one another to some extent—regardless of where one is or under which conditions one lives. The leadership of the MfS thus believed that an excessively large and strict internal control would have likely led to an ineffective system. Therefore, the MfS and its departments M and 26 attempted to motivate workers into doing work based on the roles and functions of the Ministry. The methods of this motivation involved an ingenious form of hidden coercion. It was, after all, a high priority of the MfS to emphasize collective benefit at the expense of the individual. Despite ideological schooling, the MfS saw a further need to mould the workers according to their interests in order to make sure that no workers showed dissatisfaction with their work. Through this the Ministry tried to reach a new level of quality within its departments. This did not measure in mere statistical results, but had an impact on the workers' discipline and moral. Consequently, this process led to running a stricter form of control. It called upon the full understanding of all honest and disciplined workers. Since the MfS often emphasized the need for such workers, they were supposed to feel greatly appreciated for their accomplishments. Furthermore, it meant doing important work that was intended to benefit the common interest. The workers felt directly addressed, and it was seen as an honorable gesture from the point of view of the workers that their leaders cared and showed appreciation. The leadership of the MfS thus attempted to motivate its workers in order for them truly to believe in and work for the system.

Officially, this order was put forward in order to show that all work really had value; it cleverly disguised the pressure it made on workers to accomplish their duties. The motive of the MfS, however, had nothing to do with taking care of its workers. Unofficially, it was primarily done to make workers better achieve the goals of the Ministry and SED. Such a system of structural power also had to involve certain political goals; the MfS aimed to produce a new generation of followers through its employees.

1.2 Locked society

In many ways, the hierarchical structure of the MfS made the system for a long time a success. They derived their power mainly from the workers' commitment to the MfS and the party. In addition, the system provided an exhaustive ideological schooling for workers so that they would believe without question that they simply must do what had been determined "correct." Thus, the top leaders of the party and state organs also kept possible alternative thoughts in check.

The other important structural factor used to maintain full control of the workers involved the nature of a locked society within the republic. This was completely shown in the system of the MfS. Amongst other things, this locked system allowed the Ministry to secure the development of the state, while simultaneously keeping workers uncritical towards the system itself.

Besides accomplishing that which was "correct," the MfS took care of the workers in a special way, but only in such a way so as to benefit the system. More advantages were given to workers than to the average GDR citizen, like access to education, shops, and health care. An example of such a benefit can be seen in the way that the MfS took care of any inquiries. And there is clearly also nothing negative with having free health service. However, the main—or perhaps only—reason for having such an offer was based in the interest of keeping workers healthy at all times, that they might be better able to accomplish their work. The medical practitioners thus made sure that the workers were kept as physically healthy as possible, while at the same time a certain element of pressure was simultaneously put on them. Many had to be treated because of too much stress at the workplace. This led workers to question the stress's cause. The medical practitioners gave a typical, and apparently well-functioning, "cure," which attempted to create a balance between physical and mental conditions. The "solution" for mental health matters often involved studying different socialist theories for achieving a cleaner and healthier life style. Clearly, all possible parts of the systems of the MfS and GDR were designed to assist in continuing the system. Still, the visits to medical practitioners were made in the personal interests of the workers, since such a practitioner was normally a person one can trust. A visit to a medical practitioner "outside" the MfS could have placed information that was not meant for the outside world in danger. Nonetheless, the example illustrates how workers often actually had fewer choices once they were in the MfS.

The above example shows that—regardless of what one may have wanted to do—the locked society in the state, the *MfS*, treated any matter in terms of it being "inside" or "outside" the Ministry. One's whole life was in the hands of the Ministry and it was known through the Ministry's complex network. Once inside the MfS, it was normally very difficult to leave for personal reasons. The fact was that one had been given a special position for life—a position that involved almost all aspects of daily living, as the healthcare example showed. The system of the MfS had certain rules that discouraged one from visiting one's own medical practitioner behind the back of the MfS. Thus, even standard, day-to-day matters were completely regulated by the MfS: the system had to be kept at any price. This required full security, achieved through a locked society within the GDR where the human beings were in many ways reduced to mere pieces in a game.

The example just mentioned, as well as the ideological schooling, silent coercion, and frequent emphasis on the greatness of the system, all made the workers—unconsciously or not—uncritical of the kind of situation they actually dealt with. Admittedly, it would be too simple to

claim that all people were uncritical. Nevertheless, in such a system clear rules were given for everyone and for everything that one did. This was similar to the society of the GDR, where there were in practice few, if any, possibilities to act as an individual.

2 The most important methods of the MfS

2.1 Conspiracy

In the work of the Departments M and 26, the need for conspiracy was repeatedly addressed. The role of conspiracy went hand in hand with the interest of secrecy, and the one could not and did not operate without the other. By conspiracy, I mean keeping work secret, and secret work was accomplished by this method. Its level of importance can be seen in the way that it was emphasized in every command. Conspiracy was of key importance in making sure that work was done clandestinely. It was supported by and closely related to the functions of the structures of the MfS. Some might of course say that conspiracy must be a method of every secret service. However, it was an issue to which the MfS extremely paid attention.

If a conspiracy accidentally became uncovered, a plan on how to respond would have already been set up by the responsible units.⁵ That is, the parts of the MfS involved knew exactly what to do to cover up secret efforts or plans so as to leave no traces behind. This meant that one was not to leave any traces of work done by the Ministry, which otherwise could have made the work known to persons not involved. If a conspiracy were to be revealed to "outsiders," the conspiracy—and thereby its secrecy—would have been lost. Had this occurred, departments M and 26 would have made sure to put workers on the case immediately in order to find out what had gone wrong. Similar thoroughness was applied when preparing a case. These approaches show how meticulous the work of the MfS was, as nothing was supposed to be done without first having thoroughly evaluated any related issues.

Using methods of conspiracy also involved trusting no one; achieving this goal meant taking any precautions available. In this kind of system, it was practical to consider everyone a suspect. Amongst others, this resulted in the strict examination of every worker involved in a case, a method that the author would call an example of "inner security."⁶ As seen above in the departments M and 26, the MfS made huge efforts to monitor its workers. This left them with little, if any, trust. This is perhaps not so strange, when one takes this particular system of existence into consideration. The lack of trust was an important result of the conspiratorial nature of the MfS, a nature that provided the Ministry with its most successful method of

⁵ "Unit" in this sense refers to any organized group of the MfS existing on any level of the Ministry, whether large or small, of lesser or greater importance.

⁶ For example, one needed to fill out special forms concerning tasks to be done. The forms having to do with the Central were allowed to be filled out only by hand and by the leader or deputy of any department. In the ADMs, the leader, superior deputy, leader, and deputies of the departments and independent divisions were allowed to do so. A transfer to other workers was not allowed. The interest the MfS had with such a structure lay in its wanting to let as few workers as possible know the actual procedures and goals of work (cf. e.g., Nessim Ghouas in conversations with a Captain of the Department XX of the ADM of Rostock. Rostock, 07.05.02, 16.05.02; Nessim Ghouas in conversations with a Lieutenant of the Department 26 of the ADM of Rostock. Rostock, 27.05.02). For example, secretary "unimportantly" involved in a case and who typed the reports for it did not get to know the names of the suspects involved. That is, the names of these persons were written into the report by hand after the secretary had done his work. This made the work better ensured against the enemy. The enemy could be anywhere, an idea that might be called "inner security." Clearly, the MfS made sure that its workers were to know as little as possible.

operating. What made it even more effective was the fact that it took place in a locked society. The MfS used this to hold even better control.

In terms of secrecy and the need-to-know principle, the system of the GDR and MfS was in many ways one that functioned incredibly effectively and reached its aims of control. An example of this can be seen in the case in which mail was accidentally sent to the wrong address (*Irrläufer*) and often ended up at the post offices of the GDR. Because of the hierarchical organization of the system, the workers in department M were unaware of what sort of mail they possessed. On the one hand, this shows the effectiveness of the MfS towards reaching its goals of secrecy. On the other hand, this system might not have been the most convenient, since it from time to time led to confusion. Therefore, it could often function ineffectively when the situation was complex or detailed.

As an additional point on the above paragraph, the small amount knowledge of the work done by other units necessarily led to their becoming dependent upon one another. This is quite a paradox, considering that the idea was actually to work independently, as was needed for the interests of secrecy. It thus had opposite results. Independence led to the need to create an ever-growing system. This first had to do with the fact that tasks grew rapidly. They eventually became increasingly more different and challenging. Secondly, this meant that more units were needed, since one unit—according to the principles of the MfS—had to be protected against the other. Once again, the system was occasionally too complex for solving "easier" tasks because it had to be subordinated to various other interests of the MfS.

2.2 Breaking the law

Another method of the MfS involved breaking the law. The mixture of having a huge bureaucracy and a highly prioritized interest for secrecy surely ensured from the very beginning that the Ministry would have to break the law. Departments M and 26 were obviously involved in this law-breaking. From the earliest days of the MfS, the laws on postal and telephone communication were completely ignored. Based on the general understanding of the MfS, it would not be wrong to claim that it broke the law only because it was able to through its enormous power. But saying that the MfS had to break the law because of its structural needs would not entirely explain all of its activities. Much had to do with its position in the system: there did not exist any organ of the GDR that could practically raise its hands in protest against the MfS's conduct.

In practice, the consequences of the MfS's work led to severe violations of the law. Exceptions for breaking the law seemed to be themselves the rule. In our conversations, the Major of department M of the ADM of Rostock illustrated the trend of the MfS towards breaking the law. The Major once really believed in doing an honest effort for the MfS and the SED in order to reach an even better society. This changed, however, during the later years of the MfS, when he saw that their actions were the opposite of what they preached. This huge disappointment caused him to mistrust the Ministry and eventually lose faith in the system. He is clearly an example of a person who became disenchanted with such a social system.⁷

⁷ Namely, a system that told all citizens of its greatness and that one therefore believed in. Apparently the practice of the system did not follow its claims, which led the Major into frustration and anger when he realized that his efforts were not intended for good.

The strong tendency for departments M and 26 to break the law for the sake of securing the GDR developed over a long period of time. A crucial factor here involved the creation of new roles, particularly with Mielke as the head of the system. The inner dynamics produced a unique role for the MfS and allowed it to possess far greater power than it actually seemed to have. Seen from the point of view of the MfS, breaking the law led to acting more effectively. This was a fact, even though breaking the law ran contrary to the interest of development of a socialist society. The actual theories behind socialist societies were far different. If these theories, however, were applied, the MfS would most likely have been less effective in its surveillance of the population.

One might say that the structure of the overall system led to violations of the law. Even if breaking the law was wrong according to socialist theory, it apparently had to be done in order to fulfill goals that were more important for general development. For example, most people with common sense would probably consider contributing to the common good as a good deed, since many people could enjoy the effects. But a majority of people would not simply accept this at any price. However, in the GDR there existed few, if any, possibilities to discuss alternative ways if these views were not already accepted by the leadership. Free expression of opinion was generally not accepted. Departments M and 26 quite strongly ensured that such did not take place. Even the people on the "same side" as themselves, that is, the workers of the MfS, were seldom allowed to give suggestions for improving work. Firstly, this shows how little interest there was in developing the system. As shown above, when workers gave reports about different cases, it was not unusual that the leadership ultimately ignored them. Secondly, many people were ordered to solve tasks almost like machines, which in effect did not benefit them at all. Rather, only a few benefited from this. Those who benefited belonged to the elite cadres of the GDR. It seems like the system had its own mechanism of running. As long as everything appeared to function no one raised a hand to develop something new or give any critique. This, along with the already existent pressure and fear, led to people being uncritical. This finally resulted in an inability to distinguish "right" from "wrong." The MfS cleverly managed to break the law with few, if any, problems. The system was practically designed for such activities: breaking the law turned out to be easier and more efficient than following it.

Even if the MfS acted without breaking laws, one must question how practical the laws actually were in terms of the safety and security of the people, especially if we consider that the MfS had to some extent the right to act as a legal authority in cases where criminal acts had taken place. That the law legally included the MfS in undertaking investigations of criminal acts leads to questions about the borders between security and neutrality in the MfS. Moreover, it highlights the problem of the citizens: no consequences resulted from the actions of a state that broke the law, which was especially disconcerting considering the position the MfS held in the GDR.

As the consequence of such arrangements, the MfS and its departments M and 26 were more or less determined to break the law on behalf of the SED. They acted the way they wanted in order to achieve their political goals. But despite their power over the population, the Ministry and departments M and 26 nevertheless wanted to keep their activities as secret as possible, especially since the MfS had a chance of being discovered by the persons it observed. Despite its illegality, the MfS kept track of postal and telephone communications of anyone of interest. This resulted in putting certain self-limitations on its actions. This is no wonder: it is hard to imagine what would have happened if a considerable number of the highest party functionaries

in the core circle of the SED complained about the MfS monitoring of their postal and telephone communication or if large parts of the population had found out their communication was also being monitored.

2.3 Fear

Departments M and 26 succeeded in their surveillance of the population. From the very beginning of the MfS, the Ministry proclaimed its participation in the fight against the enemy. It was considered extremely helpful to perform mail and telephone monitoring for such purposes. As the system was built up, the MfS did not allow free expression of opinion, which surely would have caused dangers in terms of the existence of the SED regime. In fact, over the years, the MfS and its departments M and 26 developed so as to be able to exercise control over absolutely anyone. To a certain point, one can agree with those authors who claim that the MfS was not able to monitor *everyone* whom it could have practically monitored. My point, however, is far more based on the fact that the MfS had the potential to observe *anyone*. As already illustrated, the operational system made sure that nothing was certain for anyone. The best example of this in the system was the method of fear used by the MfS: one was always in danger of being the next to be punished. Looking back, even Honecker could clearly have stated this, had it been possible. No one could feel exempt from being monitored, a sense that was created by fear. Thus, the omnipresence of the threat of danger and the fear that resulted was perhaps as effective a controlling instrument as active control was. There was thus an implied threat in the work of the MfS.

Clearly, from the analysis above, no one was exempt from being monitored. An example that anyone could be within range and sight of the MfS can be seen in the older generations and invalid citizens of the GDR who wanted to go abroad to visit relatives but were kept in check. Such a case shows how the MfS viewed the risks and dangers concerning the security of the SED on the outside—but fear was also present among its workers.

In fact, from the earliest days the monitoring done by departments M and 26 was not only directed towards citizens of the GDR who did not work for the Ministry, but also towards the Ministry's own workers—a situation closely connected with internal control. It was made clear that such internal surveillance was a high priority. This was effectively accomplished through the constant focus and updates on the internal control that resulted from the conspiratorial nature of the Ministry. That is, it was well organized particularly since the MfS and the departments M and 26 had a clear hierarchical structure that allowed all parts of the MfS to know exactly where they belonged at any given time. This was the reality, even though one possessed information strictly on a need-to-know basis. Since the workers always knew where they belonged, such a solution provided a fast and easy way of finding out where a problem was located. A need-to-know principle of work that applied to both departments M and 26 made it even more convenient for the higher authority to possess a wide overview of everyone. The author ascertained how effective the functioning of the system was through archival material with examples of workers in department M who were arrested for criminal acts against the MfS.

The larger the system became, the clearer it became that the MfS "had" to spend increasingly more time on internal control, most likely at the expense of "actual" control. Another example of how the structure of the system went hand in hand with conspiracy and the interest for internal control can be seen in its cooperation with the DVP. This cooperative work gave department M access to all personal files of the citizens of the GDR. This was possible

since the entire population had to be registered at the police in order to receive identity papers. In its control of the citizens of the GDR, the MfS obviously did not differentiate between "regular" citizens and those citizens working on the "same side" as the Ministry. In the latter were included citizens employed in state functions like the DVP. Once department M had gotten access to these files, it also used the information to monitor the DVP's own employees.

On the other hand, much of the reason why the MfS managed to function successfully for many years was the fact that the workers, voluntarily or not, accepted their circumstances. It was senseless to criticize the system and its patterns of work when one was a part of it oneself—even more so when a real threat of punishment existed. Because of the indoctrination present in the system of the MfS and GDR, most workers did not even get as far as to develop thoughts like these—they were simply not allowed to.

Internal control did not only take place by secret means and methods. It was also done more openly, which can be argued to be as effective as secret control. At the control places in department M, work was purposefully structured to involve a minimum of two workers. When two people worked together, each could hold the other in check. Even work clothes were made so as to stop workers from stealing mail from the MfS. There was, after all, no place to put any mail since the clothes were deliberately made without pockets. In addition, other forms of control existed to make it more difficult for workers to steal anything. One standard form of visible control was to keep track of every time workers left from work.

As mentioned in several places above, the MfS was a locked society that functioned by means of conspiracy. It was the very nature of this locked society that most likely generated the fear of it. Since no one "outside" the MfS knew what was going on inside the MfS, the unknown consequences of what might happen if one did something "against the SED" increased this fear even more. The presence of the MfS was like a dark shadow hanging over the GDR citizens, who were permanently kept in fear because they were unaware of the ways that the Ministry monitored them. The several complex roles of the IMs provided analyses of these feelings and imaginations. The psychological effect of this paid off for the MfS, since the fear established a general consciousness that some sort of secret control was taking place without knowing exactly what kind of control. Knowing only that they were being monitored while being ignorant the methods behind it made the citizens expect the worst.