

Intelligence in Public Media

The Grey Men: Pursuing the Stasi into the Present

Ralph Hope (Oneworld, 2021, Kindle edition).

Reviewed by J. E. Leonardson

The Grey Men: Pursuing the Stasi into the Present, retired FBI agent Ralph Hope's account of the death and afterlife of the Stasi, East Germany's internal security service,^a brings to mind what William Faulkner famously wrote: "The past is never dead. In fact, it's not even past."

In looking at the Stasi's life after death, Hope has written several books in one. The first is a description of how the Stasi's 91,000 officers protected the East German state by creating an all-pervasive network of informers among the country's 16 million people to identify even the slightest whiff of dissent—real, potential, or imagined—and then crushing it pitilessly with arrests, torture, long prison sentences, and the destruction of individual and family lives. The second is an account of how the Stasi, seeing the handwriting on the wall in the late 1980s, prepared for the East German collapse by shifting enormous amounts of hard currency, perhaps billions of dollars, out of the country. This money, as Hope shows, helped finance the smooth transition of Stasi officers into respectable positions in reunited Germany.^b Last, Hope lays out how the Stasi officers have escaped any accountability for their deeds. Only one Stasi officer went to prison for his crimes and former Stasi officers receive German government pensions. Former senior officers live comfortably and often are active in organizations that seek to rewrite history by glorifying the East German regime, denying the Stasi did anything wrong, and denigrating their victims.

Through all of this, Hope portrays unified Germany as morally bankrupt. In his telling, German politicians and officials do not want to talk about the past out of fear that their pre-1990 moral compromises (or worse) will come to light. Moreover, while the full list of Stasi officers is available on the internet outside Germany, German privacy laws criminalize the revelation of a former officer's past, with the result that they pop up in all kinds of places. In 1990, according to Hope, the "director of the Committee

for the Dissolution of the Stasi had a personal assistant who had been an MfS officer. . . . Fifty percent of his personnel were later found to have been Stasi employees." The problems did not go away when the confusion of unification ended, however. "In 2009, two members of the security detail for Chancellor Angela Merkel were identified as former MfS officers. . . . One of them had worked with wiretaps for the Stasi for ten years . . . [and in] the ensuing investigation it was determined that fifty-eight former officers remained employed at the state prosecutor's office." Perhaps even worse, former officers and informers worked for years in the Stasi Archives, which Hope says explains why files mysteriously went missing.

If Hope wants to make his readers angry about Germany's injustices and rank hypocrisy, he certainly succeeds. The problem with *The Grey Men*, however, is that it otherwise is hard to say what the book adds up to. Hope tells so many stories of suffering, criminality, and cover-ups that he begins to repeat himself—how many times does he need to make the comparison between the Stasi and the Gestapo, or talk about the effects of the privacy laws?—and the book loses focus. Many readers will only skim the second half or turn to other accounts of life in the bloc's secret police states, such as *Stasiland* or *My Life as a Spy*.^c

That's a shame, because those readers will miss Hope's best point. Toward the end of *The Grey Men*, Hope says that the reason to remember what the Stasi was, what it did, and the suffering it caused is the same as remembering what the Nazis did—to ensure that it does not happen again. He is absolutely right about this, and while *The Grey Men* is a good starting point, it is far from the definitive work.



a. The Stasi's official name was Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (MfS, or Ministry for State Security).

b. The KGB did this, too. See Catherine Bolton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West* (William Collins, 2020).

c. Anna Funder, *Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall* (Granta, 2003) and Katherine Verdery, *My Life as a Spy* (Duke University Press, 2018).

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