

Author(s): [Christina M. White](#)

[Cineaste](#). 32.2 (Spring 2007): p58. From *Literature Resource Center*.

The Lives of Others Produced by Quirin Berg, Dirk Hamm, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, and Max Wiedemann; written and directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck; cinematography by Hagen Bogdanski; edited by Patricia Rommel; production design by Silke Buhr; costume design by Gabriele Binder; sound design by Christoph von Schoenburg; starring Ulrich Muehe, Martina Gedeck, Sebastian Koch, Ulrich Tukur, Thomas Thieme, Hans-Uwe Bauer, Volkmar Kleinert, Matthias Brenner. Color, 137 mins. A Sony Pictures Classic release.

"Sonata of a Good Man," the title of a key musical composition in *The Lives of Others*, could be an alternate title for this film about a dedicated East German secret-service man who undergoes an internal transformation, ultimately betraying his cruel profession to serve a higher purpose that we might simply call humanity. This is a curious choice of plotline for the first major German film to explicitly address the 90,000 members of secret service (or Stasi) who kept a population of sixteen million at bay--something like a 'Schindler light' to help the nation deal with Germany's secondary historical blight of the twentieth century.

Whatever we might make of this peculiar parallel (and of the fact that while *Schindler's List* was based on a historical figure, the *Good Man* is the brainchild of a novice West German writer-director), the film ultimately works. It has even been praised by skeptically-minded East German intellectuals and artists who know a thing or two about the largely bloodless but nonetheless terrifying reign of the Stasi, among them exiled musician Wolf Biermann. And *The Lives of Others* raked in the top film awards in both Germany and Europe this year.

Not just coincidentally set in the year 1984, five years before the fall of the Wall, the film stars East German-born actor Ulrich Muhe (who once struggled with the Stasi himself) as the idealistic mid-level secret-service man Captain Gerd Wiesler--an almost inconceivable character that Muhe plays with just enough nuance to make him seem almost real. At his own initiative, Wiesler is charged with spying on the popular and apparently party-loyal playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch). To him, the playwright seems arrogant and perhaps a little too full of life to be loyal to the state. To Minister of Culture Bruno Hempf (Thomas Thieme), who officially assigns the surveillance, Dreyman represents an obstacle to his desire for the playwright's girlfriend, the vivacious actress Christa Marie Sieland (Martina Gedeck).

It is the fullness and sensuality of Dreyman and Sieland's life together--they are the eponymous "Others"--that gradually brings about Wiesler's transformation. Living in one of those notorious grey-brown concrete slab high-rises in East Berlin with a bleak modern interior of monotonous brown and orange tones, the hard-working Wiesler is a man who dresses in shades of drab grey-green and eats rice with ketchup for dinner--and this is not just meant as a commentary on the lack of available fresh vegetables in the German Democratic Republic. The one small measure of sensuality in his world is a joyless sexual encounter with a rather matronly Stasi whore who works by the clock.

Dreyman, on the other hand, lives with Christa Marie in an opulent East German Bohemian-intellectual apartment with the same favored GDR color combinations, yet their browns are warm wooden antiques and the grey-greens of the walls soothing and sophisticated. After Dreyman's fortieth birthday party, the rooms are dotted with even more useless but beautiful objects given by friends: the odd buy in a communist market that follows a logic of its own, but which he invests with another kind of meaning. The film beautifully captures the mood of East Berlin in the colors and decor of everyday life. This type of spacious apartment in an old building, without elevators and often heated with coal, was in fact often the prerogative of

artists and intellectuals in the GDR, while the higher-ups of the Stasi were given, and reputedly preferred, the conveniences of modern high-rises a la Wiesler.

At first determined to uncover the betrayal of the state he suspects in Dreyman, Wiesler instead gradually comes to appreciate--and crave--the full-blooded humanity he listens in on from the attic of the couple's apartment. In contrast to Wiesler's mission of imprisoning traitors, Dreyman's own response to betrayal is compassion in dealing with Christa Marie's coerced yet consensual affair with Minister Hempf. He understands that she fears for her career, which would clearly be in jeopardy if she were to deny Hempf's advances. Wiesler slowly learns that Dreyman is in fact as idealistically committed as he is himself--not to protecting the socialist state, but to passionately keeping alive the utopian hope buried beneath it. Dreyman prefers to further repress the repression that is increasingly penetrating his circle of friends. At least initially, he has no interest in betraying, let alone provoking, the communist state.

This changes, however, when his best friend and the director he had preferred for his dramas, Albert Jerska, commits suicide after seven years of being blacklisted for mild improprieties against the state. It is at this point that Dreyman sits down at the piano to play "Sonata of the Good Man," given to him by Jerska on his birthday--a beautiful melody by Gabriel Yared, who composed the original music that works so nicely in the film. The tune tugs at our emotions and at Wiesler's as he electronically eavesdrops from the attic above. But it is another song in the film, an original from the GDR, that more precisely addresses the crux of the film. The Seventies East German band Bayon is heard later in the film softly quoting a poem by German author Wolfgang Borchert: "Put yourself in the fire, believe in this monstrosity ... and try to be good."



Even the intimate moments of Georg (Sebastian Koch) and his lover Christa-Marie (Martina Gedeck) are monitored in *The Lives of Others*.

Both devout men, Dreyman and Wiesler embark upon the impossible and risky task of trying to be good and simultaneously faithful to a system riddled with contradictions. Dreyman soon begins to work on an article for the West German press about the officially ignored but significantly high suicide rate in the East, particularly among artists, just as Wiesler begins to act as a protecting angel watching over the playwright and the dissident friends who help him smuggle the text into the West.

Dreyman's transformation runs parallel to Wiesler's. His new desire to "do something" is in part also driven by the increasing strain put on his relationship with Christa Marie. More and more downtrodden by her unwanted affair with the minister, she is using pills to help cope. When Dreyman finally confronts her about the affair, she calls his bluff, telling him that he is as much a whore to the system as she. It is in this scene that Dreyman's idealistic naivete becomes apparent. Even after Jerska's death, he assumes that if Christa Marie is a good actress, nothing can stop her success. She knows better. While she is less a secure person than

he is, she nevertheless has the self-awareness to know that, like Jerska, she needs the stage to survive--that she is deeply dependent upon having an audience.

Shaken by their altercation, Dreyman begins to resist by writing the dissident text, but the leaden, blue-grey atmosphere works against his new-found good will. And Christa Marie begins to resist the minister's advances, yet she senses that she will pay for it in the end. When the minister instructs the Stasi to blacklist her for drug abuse, his exact words are important: he says he doesn't want to see her on a German stage again--meaning that she is also not to be given the chance of skipping out to the West. (Only those who were considered a real internal threat were either forcefully exiled or permitted to escape.)

While the characters of Dreyman and Christa Marie, and to a somewhat lesser extent Wiesler, are well developed and make sense, some of the minor characters such as the minister lack depth--his only nuance by the end of the film is the fancier new suit he wears after the fall of the Wall, where the film's trajectory takes us.

The atmosphere of the film remains heavy throughout, as the conflicts mount. To break the tension, however, first-time writer and director Florian Henkel von Donnersmarck seamlessly integrates humorous sequences that work almost better than the melodrama. The scene in which a younger, lower-level Stasi worker gets himself into trouble by reciting a communist party joke in the cafeteria is not only beautifully acted to make it quite funny, it is also appropriately tinged with Wiesler's sad realization that the party has become a cruel satire of itself. The scene also reveals the growing conflict between Wiesler and his immediate superior and old college friend Anton Grubitz (Ulrich Tukur), a party careerist who pokes fun at the naive young joker by first egging him on and then threatening to turn him in. In the same scene, Grubitz is once again pushing Wiesler to find something, anything, to incriminate Dreyman in order to gain favor with the minister. His pseudodefense of the minister's selfish and crass motives is a cynical twist on an old communist platitude that obliquely reveals the film's commentary on responsibility and complicity: he argues that the party is none other than the sum of its individual members.

Of the film itself, the opposite is true: while each of its individual characters is perhaps a little far-fetched when viewed abstractly, taken as a whole, the film is more than the sum of its characters, is more real and adds up to something worthwhile. It imparts a wide-angle view of the different ways in which artists--and average citizens, even Stasi members themselves, as we see in the end--were intimidated and coerced by the state apparatus, and shows the various ways in which they responded to these pressures. Some used their privileges to go into exile; others stayed because they somehow still believed or saw the West as no alternative, and still others tried to profit or just survive by giving in. Many either knowingly or unwittingly became part of the wide network of 'Informal Collaborators,' the dreaded title earned by Christa Marie by the end of the film. And then there were those like Dreyman, and maybe--who knows--a few like Wiesler, Good Men on all sides of existing socialism, who found ways to dissent from within.

For an East and West German public grappling with these issues--either in their personal lives or in trying to understand public figures today who are listed as Informal Collaborators of the past and who now must face those accusations--there has been little help in navigating the flood of accusations flying back and forth in the media on a regular basis. In the course of the making of this film, even actor Ulrich Muhe was involved in a legal battle with his ex-wife, actress Jenny Grollman, about whether or not he was allowed to state publicly that she served, in one way or another, as an Informal Collaborator. Both parties in this battle alternately used various state documents to make their case.

Until now, almost every major film on the GDR has included some kind of reference to the Stasi, but only one other has foregrounded a Stasi figure. Volker Schlöndorff's *The Legends*

of Rita (2000) has a West German leftist terrorist assume a new identity in the GDR as the good citizen Rita, with the help of a Stasi agent assigned to her case. In this more or less historically-based film, however, the brutality of the Stasi is only barely addressed when the Stasi agent explains to Rita that "sometimes you have to force people toward their own happiness."

Like the Seventies West German activism-turned-terrorism that serves as part of the historical background for that film, this paternalistic attitude behind GDR socialism had ruthless underpinnings. One of the most fundamental and fatal flaws inherent within East German communism is embodied by Wiesler in *The Lives of Others*: The inhumane means of instituting what was envisioned as a better society is rejected intuitively by the majority of people, leaving little basis for a "Democratic Republic." Wiesler, who once took a vow to be the "shield and sword of the Party" and now lives an empty life, is enlightened on this point as he listens to the "Sonata of a Good Man" and hears Dreymann quote Lenin on his favorite music: "I can't listen to sonatas; otherwise, I can't follow through with the revolution."

Whether or not we can really believe in the figure of Wiesler seems irrelevant; the point is perhaps that someone even so caught up in the state apparatus as this cog-in-the-wheel of a character, however threatening the consequences, might have chosen to serve more noble goals and more humane means. It is an interesting commentary, or perhaps just a lapse in the script, that Wiesler gets off rather light in the end. As the case may be, this allegorical film gets at some very real issues, motivated as it is by the fundamental insight that human beings are full of very base contradictions, and that they are subject to change. Rather than absolve any crimes of the Stasi, this film points, in a somewhat heavy hand, to the injustices experienced by the wide majority, while keeping one eye obliquely on the fact that the GDR was once envisioned as a blissful baby, not the putrid bathwater it became.

As musician Wolf Biermann, a committed but critical communist until forcefully exiled in 1976, tells us in his diatribe that ends up praising the film, some will argue the Stasi was worse, more brutal, and others will say they were in fact not as individually powerful as portrayed here; some will say that a figure like Dreyman would never have commanded so much attention from the Stasi, and others that no author could ever be so naive as to believe he was untouchable. But at least then people are debating, and at least someone like director von Donnersmarck has dared to provide something besides a state document to back himself up.

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Source Citation

White, Christina M. "The Lives of Others." *Cineaste* Spring 2007: 58+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 9 Aug. 2010.

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