



## The Spies Dilemma: A Cold War Case Study on East German Espionage

Jeffrey M. Byford

To cite this article: Jeffrey M. Byford (2013) The Spies Dilemma: A Cold War Case Study on East German Espionage, *The Social Studies*, 104:4, 139-145, DOI: [10.1080/00377996.2012.712558](https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2012.712558)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2012.712558>



Published online: 14 May 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 394

# The Spies Dilemma: A Cold War Case Study on East German Espionage

JEFFREY M. BYFORD

*Social Studies Education, The University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee, USA*

---

Set during the immediate years after the creation of the Berlin Wall, this case study focuses on the East German Ministry for State Security (MfS) and its secret police force known as the Stasi. Students, acting as West German spies working in East Berlin, recover secret documents used by the East German government in its efforts to maintain power, control, and stability over both its citizens and Western Europe. This activity uses higher-level Bloom's taxonomy as students evaluate, compare, and contrast documents for importance and relevance. Each document represents measures commonly used by Eastern Bloc nations throughout the Cold War, providing students with creative insight on how domestic and foreign espionage played a vital role in the struggle between Soviet communism and American democracy. This lesson is an example of how to use the case study approach.

**Keywords:** Stasi, espionage, case study, Bloom's taxonomy, East Germany, West Germany, domestic surveillance, Cold War

In an era of high-stakes testing and students' measured accountability of content knowledge, historical investigations are limited or neglected because of strict time constraints in the preparation of state-tested material. Historical periods, such as the Cold War, are often reduced to limited lectures, readings, and worksheets, often resulting in little student interaction or in-depth analysis and higher-level learning. As a former high school social studies teacher, I found my students often marginalized the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. While such a relationship between the world's two superpowers is partially true, my students often lacked the ability to associate and comprehend most Cold War events beyond the knowledge comprehension level. As a result, I found integrating differentiated instruction and higher-level Bloom's taxonomy in the attempt to increase student awareness of the complexities and misunderstandings among nations and events. In an effort to increase students' thinking skills, I used the case study approach to teach my students the concept of Cold War espionage among nations associated with the United States and Soviet Union. By investigating Cold War espionage, through the case study approach, students were able to investigate, analyze, and formulate various reasons why countries throughout the world spied

on each other and their citizens in the name of national security.

The concepts of active learning, through the use of case studies, were used as early as the 1960s with the Harvard Social Studies Project, which used a variety of authentic and fictional case studies of historical events to teach students to analyze the case study scenarios before reaching their independent decisions (Levin, Newmann, and Oliver 1969). The use of case studies often enabled students to understand and react to impromptu decisions that may lead to negative long-term affects and desirable outcome (Byford and Russell 2006; Chapin 2003; Pearl 2000; Wolfer and Baker 2000). Such an integration of historically based scenarios presented in a series of cases or events allows students to (1) better understand complicated issues, historical events, and content material; (2) discuss issues with their peers; and (3) engage in informative discussions related to information presented (Kunselman and Johnson 2004).

Case study materials differ in page length, content examined, and level of interaction. In general, case studies are dependent upon class discussion among students and clarify and justify their opinions on given historical events. The teacher's role in the case study approach varies according to the desired outcome. The teacher role is limited, while students search for, and reach conclusions on their own, rather than having the conclusion or knowledge provided by the teacher.

Within the discovery method there are two applications of delivery: the open-ended approach and the close-ended approach. The open-ended approach occurs when the teacher has not previously determined what knowledge

---

Address correspondence to Dr. Jeffrey M. Byford, Associate Professor, Social Studies Education, The University of Memphis, 406 Ball Hall, Memphis, TN 38152, USA. E-mail: [jmbyford@memphis.edu](mailto:jmbyford@memphis.edu)

or conclusions students are to gain for the study of a case, effectively allowing students to deal with issues, conflicts, outcomes, and consequences based on their decisions (Soley 1996). The closed-ended approach follows the assumption the teacher has already determined the knowledge, structures, or conclusions that students will discover. In terms of varying degrees of subtlety, students are prompt to reach the correct conclusion.

In this case study, the procedure consists of four steps designed to introduce students to the designated topic, foster inquiry, and provide reinforcement through a teacher-led class discussion. **Step One:** The Introduction establishes the case study in the context of what is studied. The focus is on students' previous knowledge of the topic and establishing a purpose or meaning for the activity. Such an introduction might include, but is not limited to, an attention-grabbing introduction into a dilemma or a case in which students must investigate documents in an effort to provide an outcome. **Step Two:** The Learning Experience provides students with directions and case study documents. In this step students examine documents individually or in small groups with key questions posed while explaining and analyzing information. **Step Three:** Comprehension Development students use, synthesize, and evaluate documents with discussion between fellow students or the teacher. Finally, **Step Four:** Reinforcement and Extension are designed for students working individually or in small groups to present their findings and rationale for their decisions to the class. A teacher-led discussion to clarify and verify the validity of material presented would ensue.

### **Aim and Purpose for a Cold War Espionage Case Study**

This case study was designed to investigate the Cold War practice of espionage among East and West Germany. Students analyzed and evaluated documents from West and East German governments to gather sensitive strategic information on their citizens. Such an investigation encouraged students to confront three fundamental questions: (1) What information is useful in an effort to maintain a strong national security, (2) When does a government have the right to spy and manipulate its citizens to maintain national security, and (3) When does an individual's personal liberties and freedoms outweigh a government's right for national security and control? Students should ask questions over eight unique cases associated with the West German and communist East German's rigid control and surveillance of its citizens. Such an activity lends itself when teaching about the division and ideological differences between Eastern and Western Europe during the Cold War, or the Berlin Wall in both United States and World History classrooms.

### **Historical Background of East Germany**

In October 2010, Germany celebrated its twenty-year reunification between West and East Germany. Such a

celebration of a united Germany was not always conceivable. Since the conception of capitalist West Germany in 1948 and communist East Germany in 1949, both countries have cautiously maintained a relationship with one another. In an effort to maintain both internal security and up-to-date knowledge on the West, the communist East German government created the Ministry for State Security (MfS) as the defense organ for the communist state. Like the West German Intelligence Agency, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) and the Central Intelligence Agency, the MfS' role was to protect the national interests of the country from both foreign and domestic threats through espionage and limited censorship of their civilian populations. To accomplish this goal, the Ministry for State Security created an elite secret police unit known as the Stasi. Using blackmail, electronic bugging, slander, and espionage on its own citizens and foreign nations, the Stasi was one of the most effective spy agencies in the world.

The origins of the Ministry for State Security (MfS) or Stasi began in 1950 as a small protection agency for the East German Communist Party. Modeled after the Soviet Union's secret police (NKVD) and spy agency (KGB), Stasi agents were to protect government officials and buildings. As the communist party influence and power grew, so did the overreaching influence of the MfS. In 1953, additional funding and responsibilities increased for Stasi agents. Now, in addition to the protection of government officials and buildings, the Ministry for State Security monitored the internal activities of East German citizens and the foreign activities of Western Europe.

### **Domestic Surveillance**

In 1953, two hundred Stasi district and local offices were established throughout East Germany to monitor internal threats. Unlike the West German Intelligence Agency, who monitored and limited the censorship on its citizens, the Ministry for State Security's rationale for such monitoring and censorship was based solely on the belief Stasi agents were defending East German communism from internal threats. Much like other Eastern European countries, dissenting views from civilians, the Church, universities, and the press were scrutinized and monitored (Fulbrook 2005). Such monitoring of the nation's citizens, events, and social organizations required massive resources. At the peak of the Stasi domestic surveillance, nearly 280,000 politically related verdicts were delivered, some 20,000 East Germans phones tapped for information, and close to 90,000 letters opened daily (Rückel 2008).

Even though the Ministry for State Security was efficient in their methods of domestic surveillance, East German civilians were also an intricate part of domestic surveillance (see Figure 1). Even with the number of fulltime MfS agents at 97,000, total surveillance on the population was difficult. East German citizens often volunteered as unofficial informers to gather information on family members, friends, and colleagues in the effort to receive a small payment,



**Fig. 1.** Stasi documentation of 37,000 East Germans believed to be “threats” against the Socialist government. Photo taken by author. (Color figure available online.)

simple recognition from the government by means of a cheap metal, a letter, or recommendation for a well-paying job promotion (Fritz 2009). The use of unofficial informers, to commit blackmail, leak information, and inflict personal hardship was required to monitor and control the East German population. However, for a small minority of the population, who outwardly expressed discontent for the communist regime or were viewed as a threat toward society, the Ministry for State Security would enact the widely effective practice of disintegration.

Such disintegration acts commonly included the destruction of a subject’s self-esteem often through Stasi influence and misfortunes. Misfortunes created by the MfS caused subjects to lose their jobs or led to divorces by fabricating false and misleading evidence, creating damaging rumors, or providing falsified photos or documents, all designed to destroy a subject emotionally before arrest and lengthy interrogations.

After the arrest of the individual, Stasi agents would extract information through sleep deprivation and intensive investigations of detainee family members (see Figure 2). Confessions were easiest and the most common method of conviction. Convictions were almost a certainty. Few trials lasted longer than one day because of the

influence high-ranking Stasi members had over the judicial system. The Ministry for State Security labeled East German citizens into three categories of either a hostile person, a hostile negative person, or a hardened hostile negative person. The use of surveillance did not end on the individual’s arrival to one of several special Stasi prisons. Prisoners were actively recruited to collect information on fellow inmates and continued providing Stasi agents with needed information not confessed before trial, resulting in surveillance within the prison system. Stasi agents spied on the prison staff. Prison staff spied on the inmates. Inmates spied on other inmates, and prison staff spied on fellow staff members, creating a circle of total surveillance.

### *Foreign Espionage against West Germany*

Secret MfS operations were dependent on two elements in West German society: politicians and joint West German and United States Army Intelligence services. The Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung (HVA) was the secret espionage division responsible for spying and the use of disinformation against West German politicians (Gieseke 2006). Stasi agents spoke several languages and blended well into



**Fig. 2.** Stasi prison cell used to detain East German citizens suspected of espionage or criticism of the Socialist government. Photo taken by author. (Color figure available online.)

West German society. The East German government considered itself in a class war with West Germany. The HVA's missions were to collect and leak false information to cause economic, social, and political damage on West German politicians, businessmen, and military personnel. Examples of leaked information included manufacturing false documents, audio recordings, and photos of events that never took place. In addition, Stasi agents spread false rumors that influential West German politicians secretly worked for East Germany or supposed Nazi-related organizations.

The Ministry for State Security had an interest in West German and U.S. intelligence units stationed in West Berlin. Intelligence services from NATO countries, East Germany, and her fellow Warsaw Pact allies actively sought to infiltrate both civilian and military agencies that actively collected sensitive information and censorship vital in planning for war. Stasi agents actively recruited and gathered information from U.S. Army and Air Force personnel stationed in West Germany. Stasi agents worked deep inside the West Berlin police, gathered critical information on emergency scenarios, and intelligence-gathering capabilities in the event of an invasion (Koehler 1999).

## Procedure and Preparation for the Teacher

### *For the Teacher*

Teaching about the Cold War, specifically about tensions between the Eastern Bloc and Western Europe, may be difficult. This case study affords the teacher the ability to use the case study strategy in an effort to illustrate the knowledge, resourcefulness, and creativity used by the Ministry for State Security (Stasi) and West German Intelligence Services efforts to gather critical and sensitive domestic and foreign information. This lesson is to both broaden students' cooperative skills and increase their level of critical inquiry by using an open-ended delivery case study. In an effort to guide one through this lesson, the steps are below.

### *Step One: Introduction*

*Set the case study in the context of what is studied and focus on students and establishing a purpose:* In an effort to set the stage, students are placed into groups of three to four. Inform the students the year is 1965 and they are spies

working undercover in East Berlin. They have been working for the West German government for several years, providing excellent information. However, their handler (the West German government) would like to have additional information over all aspects of the East German Secret Police (Stasi) and their abilities to gather secret information. Their team has received a once in a lifetime opportunity. After following a Stasi agent for weeks, their team has stumbled onto valuable information, with only fifteen minutes to investigate each of the documents' value. The goal is for the Stasi agent not to discover his documents are missing. There are no set criteria on what is considered valuable, so teamwork is encouraged.

### **Step Two: Learning Experience Distributed**

*Students examine the case study individually or in small groups with key questions being posed, active participation with students explaining and analyzing information:* Provide each group with their instruction sheet and eight documents. Each document deals with unique situations and operations conducted by Stasi agents both in East and West Germany. Information is diverse much like most Stasi operations. Indicate to the class they have a total of fifteen minutes to analyze, evaluate, and select the most valuable documents.

### **Step Three: Comprehension Development**

*Students synthesize and evaluate the information with discussion between students and teacher:* Allow students to evaluate each document. Provide students with the information sheet. Students select (photograph) the three most valuable documents. Students are to rank the importance of the remaining five documents. It is necessary to understand there are no set criteria for the value of each document. Students are to determine the importance and *perceived* value by West German authorities. Students are to defend their selections.

### **Step Four: Reinforcement/Extension**

*Students transfer the learning to the topic in general with teacher led discussion:* Instruct each group to identify and explain the top three documents. Inform students (through discussion or notes) of East Germany's operations throughout the world and towards its citizens. In addition, the teacher may ask the students the following questions: (1) Do government organizations like the Ministry for State Security have the power or right to investigate its own citizens? (2) When should a government, if ever, have the right to gather information on its citizens? (3) Is it appropriate to spy on foreign governments? (4) Which is greater importance: documents dealing with human rights issues or military intelligence related? and (5) What criteria did your

group use in evaluating the importance or value of each document?

### **For the Student**

The date is May 15, 1965. For the past two years, your team has secretly worked for the West German Military while spying on the Ministry for State Security's headquarters and several high ranking officials in the Socialist Unity Party (SED). In the past, your team has collected sensitive and valuable information on West German political groups and people of interest. The West German government has noticed your team's skills. Your team has recently been tasked to follow several medium-level Stasi agents believed to have a mix of interesting information regarding West Germany, along with information dealing with civil rights and espionage issues within East Germany. As your team follows one of your identified agents, a rare opportunity arises to liberate a briefcase from the Stasi agent. With briefcase in hand, your team makes a quick break to one of your predetermined safe houses.

Once the situation seems safe, your team realizes the importance of examining and selecting the most pertinent information to send back to West Berlin. It will not be long before the Stasi agent will reluctantly report the missing documents. Now time is not on your side. Your employer (West Germany) needs information on all aspects of East Germany. Your information can provide valuable information about this closed society. Your team must decide the importance of each document.

Your team finds a folder containing eight documents. Instead of sending all of the documents to your West German handler, your team takes photographs of the three most relevant documents. Remember, information is crucial, and time is not on your side. In a matter of time, the Volkspolizei (Police) will begin their search of each building. Your team must rank the importance of each document. Select the three most valuable documents (high priority), three documents of importance (medium priority), and two documents of low importance (low priority).

### **Document Number 1: Internal Espionage Activities**

Heinrich Lummner arrested on May 22, 1963, for suspicion of espionage for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and West German Intelligence. Heinrich, age 21, assigned to the northern border district/sector in East Berlin. Heinrich completed initial infantry training and border guard assignment training on October 5, 1962. Both parents are active members in the Sozialistische Einheitspartei (East German Socialist Unity Party) and considered supporters until the date of arrest.

On January 7, 1963, a Stasi informant indicated Lummner making antiparty comments. Lummner reported saying "the socialist party oppresses the peace loving people

of East Germany.” Informant (code name: Farmer) also indicated Lummner referred to Berlin Wall as Schandmauer (Wall of Shame). Additional reports from Farmer indicated Lummner’s increasing interest in Stasi surveillance of strategic areas along the northern wall fortifications. Informants within Lummner’s border guard unit indicated Heinrich was sending vital wall defenses to members in West Berlin. Two Stasi agents were “assigned” to the unit. Activity ceased.

April 15, 1963, Stasi agent (code name: Gustuff) intercepted handwritten note written by Lummner on April 10, 1963, to West German radio station XXXXX. Gustuff indicates the letter describes the “oppressive state” of the East German Socialist Party and system. Furthermore, Lummner describes economic conditions found in the motherland. A note was thrown over the Berlin Wall in glass bottle. Gustuff indicated additional notes found from three GDR soldiers in Middle and Southern sectors of wall. Evidence was “sufficient” for conviction. Three men arrested and imprisoned from unit: Joseph Thierfeld—One year—hard labor—failure to report crimes against the state. Hans Schmidt—One year—hard labor—failure to report a crime. Ekkehard Schultz—One year—hard labor—failure to report crimes against the state. Heinrich Lummner—Twenty years—hard labor—espionage activities.

Mark Jacobs—promotion to 1st Sergeant—transferred to the southern sector.

### **Document Number 2: Crimes against the People**

Walter Erdmann, age 21, second year medical student at the University Greifswald, charged with anti-party activity. During the night of November 7, along with another student (Hans Klauk) placed antisocialist fliers across the school’s campus. Previous reports (background checks dated: May 3, 1958, October 24, 1960, and May 5, 1962) indicate loyalty to party—resulting in the study of medicine. Informant Hans Christophersten indicated Erdmann’s numerous discussions of illegal travels to West Berlin while on “university travels” and possible illegal entrance into West Berlin through a false compartment in Trablant or Fiat. Both students were interrogated. Confessions to crimes were recorded for Mikel Schmidt (accomplice to Erdmann) on November 13. Erdmann did not confess to the crimes and thus isolated (in nude) for 24 hours. Transported to political prisoners ward on November 15 for “re-education activities.” Political prisoner is currently receiving physical rehabilitation.

### **Document Number 3: West Berlin Interceptions**

The following names reported as collaborators against the East Germany. Immediate action requested. Ruth von Stahl, age 29, student at Free Berlin University. Subject has

provided “technical assistance” to various Western newspapers regarding Wall fortifications, and detailed surveillance of border guard shift changes. Mikel Dahl, age 24, “disk jockey” at Freedom Radio located in West Berlin. Subject has played music deemed “subversive” to the Socialist cause. Subject has on numerous occasions has directed East Berlin citizens to escape and rise against the East Germany. Anna Ulm, 20, waitress who negotiated border obstacles in 1961. Subject is currently active in raising funds to help East German citizens pay for their freedom.

### **Document Number 4: West Berlin Police Captain**

On March 3, 1963, Stasi agent XXXX was successful in the recruitment of a West Berlin Detective (code name: Fishbed). Fishbed continues to provide the Berlin District with valuable and credible information. Information listed includes personnel structure (leadership/command structure), retiring and newly hired personnel, personnel structure and strength, readiness orders (number of officers patrolling each shift), intelligence on East German activity, current wanted lists, names of all citizens who currently reside in West Berlin, and access to the West Berlin Central Police Headquarters (wiretapped phones).

### **Document Number 5: West Berlin Police Communication Sergeant**

After the successful recruitment of West Berlin Police officer code name: Fishbed, Stasi agent XXXX made successful contact with a communication specialist working within the West Berlin Central Police Headquarters. Communications specialist (code name: Saturn) has provided the Berlin District with telecommunication codes used to transmit sensitive information dealing with emergency management, emergency response codes and data. Berlin District has verified all information and has successfully compromised codes on a limited basis.

### **Document Number 6: Terrorist Activities**

On April 5, 1963, Hans Cole, a factory worker outside of East Berlin, identified by his shift supervisor after Hans repeatedly told peers about his willingness to “make a statement” against oppression. Agent XXXX interviewed the shift supervisor and began the initial observation of Cole on April 10, 1963. While Cole was at work, Agents XXXX and XXXX successfully entered the home. Found Black powder and what appeared to be machine tubes with caps. Items photographed and left. On April 14, 1963, Hans told local priest at location XXXX “The East German government would collapse at the hands of the people” and “the socialist cause and state was ruthless and paranoid in

controlling the behavior of the masses.” Initial taped recordings within XXXX church suggest Cole is willing to enact harm to either Volkspolizie or Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Stasi) offices.

### Document Number 7: Bavarian Homecoming

Karl Schmillberg employed by the United States Army 427th Military Intelligence Battalion, West Berlin. As a civilian with security clearances, Schmillberg has access to sensitive information. On September 19, 1963, Schmillberg stole classified documents using a military mailbag. His escape was successful using false documents to enter East Berlin. The significance of Schmillberg’s information is as follows: (1) names of 42 American/West German agents working in East Germany, (2) codes to NATO forces scrambled communications (limited), (3) American/West German agents monitoring rail yard/railroad operations pertaining to Russian tank transportation, (4) detailed railroad diagrams and communications from the Polish Border, and (5) all monitoring of strategic (ammunition, food supplies, etc.) used by East German forces.

### Document Number 8: Operation Street Sweeper

Stasi Agent XXXXX successfully penetrated the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) (West German Intelligence Service) on February 2, 1963. Agent has gained access to files concerning spying activities conducted in Eastern Europe. Agent reports on various occasions of CIA activity in the GDR seaport of Warnemünde and various railroad activities in Rostock. The Agent indicates several Western Intelligence officers embedded in East German and Russian intelligence services. The following military units assigned to defend GDR soil: (1) 11th Guards Tank Division located in Dresden, East Germany; (2) 34th Engineer Regiment located in East Berlin; (3) 10th Armor Division located in Potsdam, East Germany; and (4) 94th Motorized Rifle Division located in Schwerin, East Germany. Furthermore, Agent indicates Western Intelligence has detailed records of troop strengths, military leave (rotation of soldiers), and current levels of munitions on reserve status.

### Conclusion

Students born after the end of the Cold War often have difficulty understanding the competition among the world’s superpowers. To expose students to events that occurred regularly among nations throughout the Cold War, a case study approach, which encourages critical thinking and the implementation of higher level Bloom’s taxonomy, was used.

This time-tested case study allows students to analyze and prioritize fictional secret documents associated with Cold War espionage among competing nations. Through the use of cooperative learning and problem solving, students associate the value and importance of each document. This lesson provides students creative insight into a secret world of domestic and foreign espionage activities not commonly associated with the political, social, economic, and military dilemmas of the Soviet Union and the United States.

### References

- Byford, Jeffrey, and William B. Russell. “Analyzing Public Issues—Clarification through Discussion: A Case Study of Social Studies Teachers.” *Social Studies Review* 46 (2006): 70–2.
- Chapin, June. *A Practical Guide to Middle and Secondary Social Studies*. New York: Pearson, 2003.
- Fritz, Oliver. *The Iron Curtain Kid*. Lexington, KY: Self Publication, 2009.
- Fulbrook, Mary. *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Gieseke, Jens. *The GDR State Security: Shield and Sword of the Party*. Berlin: The Federal Commission for the Records of the State Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic, 2006.
- Koehler, John O. *Stasi: The Untold Story of the East German Secret Police*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999.
- Kunselman, Julie, and Katherine Johnson. “Using the Case Study Method to Facilitate Learning.” *College Teaching* 52 (2004): 87–92.
- Levin, M., F. M. Newmann, and D. W. Oliver. *A Law and Social Science Curriculum Based on the Analysis of Public Issues*. Washington: Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1969.
- Pearl, N. “A Task Force to Reduce Prison Overcrowding: Implications for Criminal Justice Policy, Planning and Research Methods Course.” *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 11 (2000): 111–22.
- Rückel, Robert. *The GDR Guide: Everyday Life in a Long Gone State in 22 Chapters*. Berlin: Druckhaus Publishing, 2008.
- Soley, M. “If It’s Controversial, Why Teach It?” *Social Education* 60 (1996): 9–14.
- Wolfer, L., and T. E. Baker. “Teaching Organized Crime Patterns: An Active Learning Approach.” *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 11 (2000): 79–96.