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WEEKEND BREAK

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Sobering stories from behind the Berlin Wall

For national security, a culture of informants, betrayal and brutalism

By STEVE FORRESTER
The Daily Astorian

While waiting for a flight from Budapest to Prague, I browsed the airport's newsstand. It was an array of magazines that you would find in many other European terminals. But in one corner of the literary section, I spotted a quarterly with an arresting, provocative cover. On the front of New Eastern Europe was a drawing of a man whose mouth was padlocked. His eyes were framed by a set of glasses that could be used to blind him.

The issue's theme was Silencing Dissent: The Plight of Political Prisoners in Eastern Europe.

When I took it to the sales clerk, her look evinced disapproval.

Hungary today is free of its Soviet overseers. But my airport moment reminded me how one may feel watched in a totalitarian society.

Some 40 years ago, on a tour to Moscow and Leningrad, I watched an interchange between a Soviet customs official and a traveler from New York. The Soviet in a military uniform seized a book they found inside of one of my fellow passenger's luggage. Earlier I observed the Soviet gatekeepers seize posters from a young Russian athlete returning home.

When we attempt to grasp another nation's culture, there are two levels of understanding. One is to comprehend it intellectually; the other is to feel it emotionally — to know what it looks like, feels like, smells like. To do that, you have to go there or know someone who's been there.

The Wall

We know there was a wall separating East and West Germany. We know the wall was built to keep Germans inside the Russian sector — the German Democratic Republic, or GDR. We know the wall came down on Nov. 9, 1989, in one of the most dramatic events of the late century. But few of us in the West grasp just what went on behind that wall.

I've completed reading "Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall." The book was recommended by a young guide whom my wife and I met in Dresden. The Australian author, Anna Funder, researched her book by advertising for former agents of the East German secret police, the Stasi, to tell their stories.

Funder conveys the emotional intelligence behind the East German secret police and East Germany's culture of informants, betrayal and brutality, off which the Stasi fed. With its vast network of employees and informants, the Stasi constituted what Funder calls the most extensive sur-

Writer's Notebook

veillance society in world history — beyond the scope of Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia.

Frau Paul

The ingredients of "Stasiland" are a set of encounters with former Stasi agents and their victims. The most disturbing chapter is titled "Frau Paul." Sigrid Paul's troubles began when her child was born with a ruptured digestive tract. From infancy to 5, the boy lived inside a West German hospital while his mother lived in the East. The Stasi recognized that this woman's distress would lead her to an attempted escape.

Frau Paul faced a classic dilemma between the option of informing on someone in exchange for free access to her son or being imprisoned. She fell into the Stasi's trap.

The former prisoner takes Anna Funder to the Hohenschonhausen prison of East Berlin, where political prisoners like her were held. Now empty, it is a nondescript building, but with its instruments of degradation intact. Frau Paul has Funder sit inside a small cell within the paddy wagon in which she was transported. She shows Funder the small stools on which she sat in interrogation rooms. She describes the revolting smells that accompanied the tasks forced on her.

Frau Paul is a free woman. But it is not a story with a happy ending. There are no happy endings in Funder's book, except for a 16-year-old girl whom Funder encounters in a park. The girl was 6 when the Wall fell.

At a time when racial purity parties are gaining ground in France and Germany and with a new American president who thinks he can do business with a former KGB agent, this book is sobering.

Clearly written, "Stasiland" describes a culture that is somewhat similar to what Blaine Harden paints in "Escape From Camp 14" — a book about North Korea's unfathomable culture of informants and mass imprisonment or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," about Stalin's Gulag.

Steve Forrester is the former editor and publisher of The Daily Astorian. He is president of the EO Media Group board of directors.

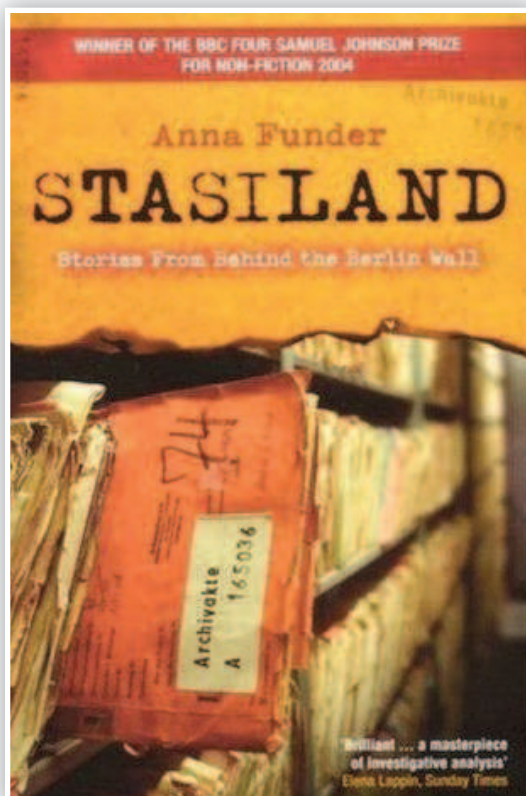


Anna Funder



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People atop the Berlin Wall near the Brandenburg Gate on Nov. 9 1989. The text on the sign "Achtung! Sie verlassen jetzt West-Berlin" ("Notice! You are now leaving West Berlin") has been modified with an additional text "Wie denn?" ("How?").



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← An American will find this book about the East German secret police sobering.