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## The Complex Dynamics of Deliberate Ignorance and the Desire to Know in Times of Transformation

### The Case of Germany

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#### Abstract

Individuals and institutions in societies in transition face difficult questions: whether or not to seek, explore, and produce public knowledge about their harrowing past. Not disclosing painful truths can be a conduit to reconciliation, as in premodern memory politics, but it can also mask the past regime's perpetrators, benefactors, and its victims, highlighted in modern memory politics. Using the transformations of twentieth-century Germany as a case study, this chapter argues that deliberate ignorance has always been an element of memory politics, even in the twentieth-century approach to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past), with its emphasis on knowledge, remembrance, and disclosure. Profoundly dialectic in nature, deliberate ignorance can modulate the pace of change in periods of transition and preserve social cohesion, while simultaneously undermining personal trust and institutional confidence. Turning to individuals' decisions to read or not read the files compiled on them by the East German's Ministry for State Security, it is argued that official memory politics and individuals' knowledge preferences need not concur. In the public records and in initial results of an empirical analysis of individuals' choice not to read their files, highly diverse and distinct reasons for deliberate ignorance have been observed.

*Omnem memoriam discordiarum oblivione sempiterna delendam censui.*

[All recollection of civil discord should be buried in everlasting oblivion.]

—Cicero, *Orations*

Historical amnesia is a dangerous phenomenon not only because it undermines moral and intellectual integrity but also because it lays the groundwork for crimes that still lie ahead.

—Noam Chomsky (2016), *Who Rules the World?*

In *Who Rules the World?* Chomsky (2016) commented on the capacity of the U.S. public and politicians to forget about the “torture memos”—a set of legal memoranda drafted during the Bush administration that argued for the legal permissibility of enhanced interrogation techniques—and to largely ignore the new paradigm that took root: torture backed by the United States and executed by U.S. allies worldwide, a practice that continued under the Obama presidency. As Allan Nairn pointed out in a blog entry from January 24, 2009: “Obama could stop backing foreign forces that torture, but he has chosen not to do so...and even if, as Obama says, ‘the United States will not torture, it can still pay, train, equip and guide foreign torturers’....Obama could stop backing foreign forces that torture, but he has chosen not to do so.”<sup>1</sup> Chomsky identified this willful ignorance as the same capacity for historical amnesia at play in other “crimes” (Chomsky 2016:43), such as the U.S. invasions of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and Iraq, and U.S. colonial rule in the Philippines. The painful conflict between proclaimed values and actual behavior appears to be resolved by deliberately ignoring evidence that contradicts the United States’ self-image of being “a nation of moral ideals” (Chomsky 2016:32). Chomsky noted that deliberate ignorance has a price; as the oft-invoked principle states, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana 2011). In a speech commemorating the fortieth anniversary of Nazi Germany’s capitulation, former West German president Richard von Weizsäcker (1985:4) repeated the sentiment: “Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risks of infection.” Yet the intense debate following the speech was evidence that public opinion was actually deeply divided on how to balance remembrance and historical amnesia.

The historian Christian Meier (2010; see also Rieff 2017), however, offered a more differentiated perspective on the role and function of historical amnesia. In his view, forgetting atrocities in the wake of war and repressing memories and knowledge can be a conduit to reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge of

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.allannairn.org/2009/01/torture-ban-that-doesnt-ban-torture.html> (accessed Jan. 16, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> One may ask whether the term “forgetting” is appropriate. In the title of his book, *das Gebot zu vergessen*, Meier (2010) speaks about the imperative to forget. Technically speaking, forgetting is the apparent loss or modification of information already encoded and stored in an individual’s long-term memory. Therefore, what Meier seems to have in mind is a consensus by those in power to ignore the crimes of the past, neither examining nor prosecuting them (with the exception of some emblematic figures), and thus neither identifying nor punishing the bulk of the perpetrators, let alone the followers. Functionally, it is as if the people in power have decided deliberately to ignore the past (Hertwig and Engel, this volume, 2016), even if individuals’ memories persist. Our use of “forgetting” in this chapter follows this definition. For further discussion on the relationship between forgetting and deliberate ignorance from a

a harrowing past may perpetuate a destructive cycle of hatred and revenge; in contrast, the deliberate choice to not remember can put an end to conflict. Meier listed historical instances of this function of deliberate ignorance, from Cicero's (1913) plea for "everlasting oblivion" just two days after Caesar's assassination to the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' War and referred to *oblivo* and *amnestia*—forgive and forget—in its introductory articles. According to Meier, collective forgetting and the political choice to not seek, explore, or produce public knowledge about a painful past are essential for managing the transition of power and social cohesion. Here we examine whether this argument may not only hold for collectives, institutions, and governments but also for individuals. Specifically, we examine both collective and individual deliberate ignorance (Hertwig and Engel, this volume, 2016) in transitional societies, where the need to navigate between remembrance and deliberate ignorance is most pressing.

### **The Simultaneity of Forgetting and Remembrance**

Many past societies, from antiquity to the modern age, relied primarily on ignorance and forgetting in times of societal and political transitions (Meier 2010). In the wake of the French Revolution, however, a new priority that valued knowledge over ignorance began to emerge. With it, the codification of human rights slowly gained momentum, and their violation—whether past or present—became crimes to be prosecuted and remembered rather than forgotten. Centuries later, the horrors of the Holocaust intensified the emphasis on remembrance; this new memory model began to guide and shape collective memory, in particular in Germany (Assmann 2016b; Erll 2011; Minow 1998; Roth 2011; Tismaneanu and Iacob 2015). Instead of promoting the act of forgetting and concealing the sins of the past, disclosure was required to identify the previous regime's perpetrators, followers, and benefactors, as well as to honor its victims. Human rights and transitional justice became the guiding principles of twentieth-century memory politics (Buckley-Zistel and Schäfer 2014). The shift toward the modern memory policy of knowledge and remembrance has partly obscured the role of deliberate ignorance. Although historians and sociologists have recently been concerned with forgetting (Assmann 2016a; Connerton 2008; Dimbath and Wehling 2011) and amnesia (Plate 2015), their work emphasized the link to traumatic experiences (Bar-On 1993; Duranti 2013; Marcowitz and Paravicini 2009; Winter 2016) and conceptualized silence about past experiences as primarily a deficiency, although some sociologists have started to examine the value of non-knowledge or *Nichtwissen* (e.g., Gross and McGoey 2015; Wehling 2015b). The notion that silence, defined by

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psychological perspective, see Schooler (this volume); for concepts and mechanisms of forgetting in the fields of history, sociology, and memory studies, see Connerton (2008), Dimbath and Wehling (2011), Plate (2015), Ricoeur (2006), and Rieff (2017).

Winter (2010:3) as acts of “non-speech,” is a conscious and productive activity (Assmann 2008) is still mostly novel and unfamiliar.

Since the end of World War II, Germany’s official memory policy has prioritized knowledge and recognition in the management of collective memory. Yet this does not mean that deliberate ignorance ceased to exist. Clearly, there are profound differences between premodern and modern memory politics, as described by Meier (2010). We will argue, however, that deliberate ignorance has always been, and still is, part of memory politics: it manifests differently, for example, in diverse countries, depending on social and political conditions (Jarausch 2008; Kühner-Wielach and Nowotnick 2018), and occurs on the collective level, the individual level, or both. We propose that the premodern and modern models of coming to terms with a painful past have more in common than has thus far been recognized. Forgetting and deliberate ignorance are still important tools for stabilizing social order in times of transformation. While the memory politics that emerged in the twentieth century have clearly reversed the premodern priorities of memory politics, putting knowledge and remembrance before ignorance and forgetting, the latter remain relevant, in particular on the individual level. Importantly, the memory practices of individuals are not necessarily governed by the normative power of the collective memory model.

Here we explore deliberate ignorance in periods of transition on both collective and the individual levels. As we will demonstrate, individuals practice deliberate ignorance in times of transition, and not infrequently. Using the choice to not look up one’s Stasi files (i.e., files collected by East Germany’s Ministry for State Security) as a paradigmatic case, we aim to shed light on individual motives for deliberate ignorance. We demonstrate how collective preferences for information or ignorance can coincide or diverge from individual preferences and how they can change according to political circumstances. After some introductory comments about the interdependency of knowledge and power, we turn to the dynamics of disclosure and deliberate ignorance in times of power change.

### **Knowledge, Secrecy, and Power**

In the face of past misdeeds, the tension between memory and historical amnesia—forgetting or, more precisely, deliberate ignorance (see footnote 2)—is not about producing a veridical record of the past for future generations. It is about power, human rights, and identity. As Foucault (1972) argued, the production of knowledge and ignorance is directly linked to power and the lack thereof. The dynamic relationship between knowledge and power is understood as the struggle over claims of truthfulness, which invoke their own norms and habits, discursive structures, actors, organizations, and sciences (Haugaard 1997). Power and knowledge, as well as ignorance, are intertwined

in a productive and constitutive relationship. Rulers know that power cannot be executed without knowledge—census data, mortality tables, tax data, and the like are crucial to running an effective public administration—and conquerors have understood that information is essential for dominating a territory. Since the twentieth century, Western societies have defined themselves as knowledge societies, where knowledge is essential for social organization and productivity (Beck et al. 1996; Gibbons et al. 2006). At the same time, the lack of knowledge—ignorance, silence, and secrets—proved to be important for stabilizing political and social order. For instance, secrets were essential to creating legitimacy in the early modern period, when individuals believed the world was created and ruled by divine power. By concealing the circumstances of their decisions, monarchs cultivated a special aura that set them apart from ordinary people and made them seem more like unknowable gods (Gestrich 1994). The complementary relationship of knowledge, ignorance, deliberate ignorance, and even the systematic production of ignorance (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008) is perhaps most exposed in transitional societies seeking to first disrupt and then stabilize social and political order. Yet the interplay of knowledge and deliberate ignorance has been neither understood nor researched in this context. In the context of the seeming antagonism of memory and knowledge versus forgetting and silence, recent research in memory studies has stressed “the risk of a binary approach” (Dessingué and Winter 2016:1) and conjectured that an intersection of these phenomena and processes are complex and highly dialogical. In the same vein, we argue that deliberate ignorance is dialectic, dynamic, and complex, and is interwoven with memory and power.

### **Ousting a Knowledge Regime in Political Transformation**

Power requires continuous legitimization. The interaction between knowledge and ignorance is a basic instrument for not only exercising power, but also legitimizing authority. This is why a new regime of knowledge and ignorance must be installed during and after all revolutions. Establishing this new regime requires two complementary and simultaneous processes: (a) driving out the old knowledge regime by breaking its rules, uncovering its secrets, destroying its information, abolishing its symbols, and forgetting its traditions, while (b) introducing a new regime of knowledge by defining distinct norms, establishing new experts, collecting different data, establishing founding narratives, and introducing fresh rituals. The “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm 1983) and the “silencing of the past” (Trouillot 1995) always go hand in hand.

These shifts must be implemented on both collective and individual levels. This is not an easy task; power struggles can make reorganizing knowledge regimes brutally violent, and the expansive nature of knowledge and ignorance makes installing new knowledge regimes painful and confusing (an issue to which we return shortly in the context of the end of the German

Democratic Republic). Establishing new regimes of knowledge turns the world upside down: what was right and respected yesterday is a source of shame and disgrace today, and once-precious information becomes useless or even incriminating. Clashes over who has the prerogative of interpretation are often merciless, since only the winners can consolidate their power. History offers many examples of the grim establishment of new knowledge regimes: the burning of tax lists during the French Revolution; iconoclasm in the Reformation, the English Civil War, and the Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions; and the public naming and shaming of collaborators in the wake of numerous historical transitions.

These and many other events imply that accusation, shaming, and degradation, instigated as top-down policies but also spontaneously and bottom up, are central elements of the rite of passage into a new knowledge regime. It was never enough to kill the king: he had to be stripped of his symbols of power, be ridiculed in front of his people, and meet his end before a raucous crowd. These rituals of degradation have been crucial in completely delegitimizing old orders, institutionalizing a new regime of knowledge, and transforming individuals' identities (Garfinkel 1956). Accusation and shaming serve a dialectical goal: social exclusion of the old elites and sympathizers of the toppled regime, and social integration for all who are willing to be ashamed of the old norms and practices and follow new ones. Criminology has long proven that shaming procedures can exert a dual effect by simultaneously stigmatizing and integrating (Braithwaite 1992). This dialectical quality makes shaming practices a powerful tool wielded by revolutionary and reformative movements. Deliberate ignorance, a tool that can balance shaming practices, has a similarly dialectical nature.

Shaming delegitimizes the old social order and brings to light its social or moral corruption while simultaneously establishing a new regime of knowledge and ignorance. This is an effective way to institutionalize a change of power while modulating the continuity of social interaction. Because shaming can both destroy old knowledge regimes and help establish new ones, it is an important tool for revolutionary and reformative movements (Jacquet 2015). Where shaming produces confusion and pain, however, deliberate ignorance can offer clarity and relief. Deliberate ignorance plays an important role in social and political upheaval: It shields people from the need for shaming procedures and produces stability by balancing the ruptures of transformation and disclosure. Deliberate ignorance fosters continuity in the face of fundamental change.

### **The History of Deliberate Ignorance: Transformations in Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century Germany**

Sweeping away an old political order while simultaneously establishing a new one is the most pressing challenge faced by societies in disruptive

transformation, especially in the aftermath of civil wars, oppressive regimes, mass atrocities, or a violent coup d'état. Reckoning with violent pasts is a challenge that has been faced around the world: in postcommunist European countries, postmilitary dictatorships in South America, postapartheid South Africa, in the Catholic Church (after revelations of sexual abuse) or in postcolonial societies, as they face their treatment of indigenous populations (Assmann and Conrad 2010), and, of course, Germany. In the twentieth century, Germany underwent several profound regime changes, two of which are particularly important in the context of deliberate ignorance and the collective and individual negotiations of knowledge and ignorance. The first, the end of the Nazi dictatorship in 1945, left Germany devastated, defeated, and divided. The second, the end of the repressive regime of East Germany in 1989, led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, and German reunification. Both transitions marked a political change of power and, due to the violent nature of the previous regimes, were deeply linked to issues of justice, human rights, and reconciliation. Germany developed a very specific way of addressing its history: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or coming to terms with (or even overcoming) the past (Adorno 1977). We will use the case of Germany to explore the complex, dialectical, and productive role of deliberate ignorance in transformational societies. To this end, we distinguish four historical periods (each of which featured a different blend of knowledge and ignorance) and their distinct memory policies.

### **The Premodern Priority of Ignorance**

Challenging the modern orthodoxy of remembrance and enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) when facing a nation's grim past, Meier (2010) argued that forms of institutionalized forgetting are key to establishing and maintaining a new social contract that allows perpetrators, followers, and victims of the old system to coexist. Although the state has only limited influence over whether and how individuals remember or forget, it can suppress public remembrance and pass laws to forestall or punish public discourse that would open old wounds. Such laws were frequently passed to end civil wars. Meier noted that while there are several historical cases where legislation that imposed a veil of ignorance on the individual indeed appears to have promoted political and social integration, Germany's individual and publicly fabricated remembrance of World War I is an important illustration of the risks of the inability to forget. Following World War I, Germany's first democracy, the Weimar Republic, was established. It failed for numerous reasons. In terms of knowledge management, these included the intense collective and individual remembrance of German suffering (including high reparations); the strong sense of injustice and moral blame (Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, the so-called "guilt clause," which ruled that Germany was responsible for the conflict); the ongoing admiration of German war heroes such as Paul von Hindenburg, who was elected as the

Weimar Republic's second president despite his professed monarchism and hostility toward the democratic approach; and the invention of false memories which argued, for instance, that the German army had been compromised by Jews, socialists, or Bolsheviks, thus causing the country to lose the war (Vascik and Sadler 2016). In Meier's view, if the conditions of peace do not allow the collective and individual memory to rest, the risk of revenge and revolution will persist.

### **Post-World War II: Concurrent Practices of Deliberate Ignorance**

After World War II, the Allied powers tried to inhibit this destructive blend of ignorance and fabricated memories. In light of numerous war atrocities and a shocking genocide, the Allies instigated the legal prosecution of crimes against humanity. The court trials held after 1945 served a dual purpose: to punish the Nazi elite and to initiate research and education concerning the Nazi dictatorship. These measures were accompanied by media campaigns displaying disturbing images of the atrocities that had been committed (Weckel 2016). In shaming Germans about their complicity, the Allies aimed to delegitimize the Nazi regime and create support for the new German state. For a short period—from the end of the war until the new German government settled into power—Allied occupation policy followed a rigid regime of knowledge and enlightenment.

This initial period of denazification, however, came to a swift end. In pursuit of their strategic goals—to overcome past hatred, build a foundation for a new Europe, and form new Cold War alliances (including with Germany)—the Allies eventually supported a policy of not wanting to know: of amnesty, silence, and repression (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 2007; Niethammer 1982). In fact, German memory policy in the 1950s and early 1960s followed Meier's (2010) description of the knowledge regime following the Peloponnesian War. Like ancient Athens, West Germany put its elite on trial and, for the sake of social peace, remained silent about citizens' suffering, complicity, and responsibility. This collectively sanctioned policy of partial deliberate ignorance was largely practiced at all levels of politics and society for approximately three decades, permitting many former members of the Nazi party and high officials of the Nazi regime to occupy powerful positions in law, medicine, academia, the military, state intelligence services, and politics.

### **The 1968 Student Movement: A New Interplay of Public Knowledge, Exposure, Recrimination, and Private Deliberate Ignorance**

The balance of knowledge and ignorance was adjusted once again during the radical social and political change of 1968. As in the United States and other European countries, left-leaning students in West Germany took to the streets in the late 1960s. It has been argued that Germany's student movement

was different from its counterparts across Europe. This generational conflict coalesced around the unique historical guilt of the Holocaust, namely, the complicity of protesters' parents in the crimes of the Nazis and their subsequent conspiracy of silence (Gassert and Steinweis 2007; Kundnani 2009). The German movement initiated a complete restructuring of the knowledge regime and by the late 1970s had grown into a West German discourse on the collective memory of the Nazi past that embraced knowledge, enlightenment, and education that canonized the moral duty to remember while "demonizing forgetting" (Fuchs 2006). Continuing into the 1980s and 1990s, the ongoing memory boom produced a vast body of knowledge regarding Germany's Nazi past and further integrated it into the public discourse across all levels of society (Assmann and Frevort 1999).

Yet the veil of ignorance was not completely lifted. Recent research (von Hodenberg 2018) suggests that the desire to know who was involved in designing and executing Nazi policies and crimes was primarily focused on the public sphere. Prominent West German politicians, journalists, and judges with a Nazi past were identified and stripped of their office and social status; less conspicuous collaborators, however, remained for the most part untouched, enjoying pension payments from the West German government at the same time that victims of Nazism were fighting for financial compensation. As von Hodenberg (2018) argued, revealing Nazi collaborators was not a goal in itself, but rather was used to discredit illiberal professors and politicians. Research into the Nazi histories of well-liked liberal figures was sloppy or simply nonexistent, while less prominent individuals were accused, sometimes baselessly, of having Nazi pasts. Moreover, public debate coincided with silence in the private sphere (Bar-On 1993; von Hodenberg 2018; Welzer et al. 2002). Although postwar generations have known that their grandparents' and parents' generations must have contained Nazis and perpetrators, they, through various techniques (e.g., reframing, forgetting, blanks), have refused to acknowledge the involvement of their own relatives. In a striking self-analysis, the distinguished journalist Cordt Schnibben vividly described his own struggle with coming to terms with his parents' Nazi convictions and deeds (Schnibben 2014)—his father was a member of Operation Werewolf and played an active role in the murder of a local Nazi opponent. Describing his thoughts and emotions when, years after the death of his father, he finally found court files and letters revealing his parents' complicity, Schnibben wrote, "I have needed more than 10 years to find these boxes [of court files]. Because for a long time, I was not certain whether I wanted to find them" (Schnibben 2014). Coping with disturbing family histories by denying them or sweeping them aside has also been documented in South American societies (Frei 2018).

More generally, closing one's eyes to disturbing traces of a loved one's past and facing them only after their death indicates that, in the context of political and social transformation, the practice of deliberate ignorance is likely to be shaped by generational experiences (Burnett 2010; Mannheim 1952).

Other key determinants of deliberate ignorance may be age, gender, race, and religion. Consider, for illustration, the contemporary debates and conflicting views in the context of the #MeToo movement, or revelations about physical abuse of indigenous children in residential schools, or sexual abuse in religious institutions.

### **The Shaming Power of Public Knowledge and the Role of Deliberate Ignorance after the East German Revolution (1989)**

The collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was a peaceful revolution. As in other revolutions, establishing a new regime of knowledge was vital. The reference point and catalyst of the emerging protest was the Stasi, the GDR's ministry for state security, and its vast collection of files. The public debate and the struggle between knowledge and ignorance quickly focused on the Stasi because it was perceived as a "massive machinery of observation and control" (Fulbrook 1995:54) and the cornerstone of the East German dictatorship. East German civil rights activists demanded that the Stasi files be opened in order to expose how the system of repression functioned and to identify collaborators who had violated the basic rights and well-being of their fellow citizens. East German citizens occupied Stasi offices in East Berlin, Leipzig, and other cities, chanting slogans such as *meine Akte gehört mir* (my file belongs to me). Clearly, disclosing how the Stasi had operated was a powerful symbol of the transfer of power. Yet even though opening up the files was the protesters' key demand, elements of deliberate ignorance were present from the very beginning and finely measured according to the desired speed of change. For instance, having helped to rescue them from destruction (by the outgoing GDR regime), civil rights activists supported the decision to destroy the central electronic file index and the accompanying software in February 1990 (Schumann 1997). In March 1990, a committee of civil rights activists and GDR government representatives agreed that all files containing personal information should be destroyed in the near future—an agreement that had nothing to do with the end of the GDR (Gill and Schröter 1991). During these early days of transformation, it was still unclear how the information in the files should be used. Only after civil rights groups discovered that some members of the Volkskammer (East Germany's first and only freely elected parliament) had cooperated with the Stasi did one possible use emerge: mandatory screening of parliamentarians. Yet civil rights groups remained undecided as to whether the screening results should be published or kept confidential, and even some protesters, fearing a lynch-mob mentality, called for amnesty (Der Spiegel 1990; Schumann 1997:17). In this fast-paced process of political transformation, deliberate ignorance stabilized individual identity as well as social cohesion and slowed the pace of social disruption and political change.

The debate as to whether the files should be made public, used for limited and well-defined purposes in a confidential setting, or destroyed without

being read preoccupied and divided East Germany and was disputed in its parliament. Some parliamentarians believed opening the files was necessary to establish public trust in the government; others were afraid that the kind of information that would come to light would poison the whole country. Being suspected and named as an “IM” (*informeller Mitarbeiter* or informal collaborator) of the Stasi became deeply disgraceful. “If names are mentioned here in public, you can also give people a rope around their necks,” declared Ralph Geisthardt, Christian Democratic parliamentarian (Schumann 1997:16). His concern offers a way to explain why IMs might not want to read their files: to escape shame, to avoid being confronted with their own wrongdoing, and to continue to gloss over the rift between what they stood for and what they did.

In these times of rapid change, full and fast disclosure presented a risk—even to prominent civil rights activists<sup>3</sup>—and produced a situation of “turmoil and mistrust during the formative period of democracy” (Marshall 1992). Deliberate ignorance helped people navigate between knowledge and silence, offering the flexibility required to adjust to a profoundly novel situation. For instance, when left with no choice but to work with the same colleagues and to live next to the same neighbors, not finding out whether they had been feeding information to the Stasi may have been the veil of ignorance shielding one’s proximate world from turmoil and total mistrust. This was true for both collective and individual needs. In the summer of 1990, a compromise between full disclosure and complete ignorance seemed to be the most appropriate option. GDR Home Secretary Peter-Michael Diestel wanted to use the files to rehabilitate victims and punish perpetrators, which, according to his estimation, would take six to nine months to complete; afterward, he wanted to destroy the files to allow the country to heal. In July 1990, the Volkskammer discussed a bill concerning the use of Stasi files (“Law on the use and security of personal data of the former MfS/AfNS”). The bill gave victims and state agencies access to the files to monitor their rehabilitative history and punish perpetrators, respectively. It also limited right of access to a period of one year and stipulated that the files would be destroyed. On August 24, 1990, the Volkskammer passed a bill that banned the destruction of Stasi files; the files were secured in special archives and personal access to them was denied.<sup>4</sup>

After an emotional debate in September 1990, the Volkskammer decided to implement a mandatory Stasi check on its members. The results were to be read aloud in a meeting but behind closed doors. Again, deliberate ignorance was complementary to disclosure and was intended to regulate the disrupting

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<sup>3</sup> One of many examples is Ibrahim Böhme, member of the *Bürgerkomitee* (Citizens Committee) and chairman of the Social Democratic Party in the GDR. He resigned after being identified as an IM (Lahann 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Due to the pressure of East German civil right activists, the East German bill was adopted after German reunification. On November 14, 1991, the Stasi documentation law (*Stasiunterlagengesetz*) was passed in the Bundestag (German Federal Parliament) and, finally granted personal access to the files. For a detailed documentation of the debate, see Schumann (1997).

effects of exposure and control the pace of change. At this point, West German media entered the already heated debate, published the Stasi checks of the Volkskammer members, and uncovered Stasi collaborators within all parties (Die Tageszeitung 1990). The dimension of the Stasi networks—even in newly elected bodies—as well as the broad debate in West German media moved public opinion ever more closely toward complete disclosure. Important voices, however, still opposed this option. Lothar de Maizière, the GDR's first and only democratically elected prime minister, predicted that if victims had access to their files, “then there will be no neighbors, friends, colleagues, then there is only killing and manslaughter” (Dresdner-Morgenpost 1990).<sup>5</sup> The former chancellor of West Germany, Helmut Schmidt, later declared: “My instinct would have been to burn everything unread. If it had been up to me, they would have poured everything from the Stasi legacy into the sink” (Leipziger-Volkszeitung 2002). Schmidt's inclination to destroy Stasi files was paradigmatic for most of the West German political elite, who openly discussed their plans to destroy the still-unread Stasi files in parliament (Lintner 1991:2378). Deliberate ignorance in this case was a tool for stabilizing power by shielding the privileges and wrongdoings of the political elite—in both East and West Germany.

Opposing amnesty and ignorance, East German civil activists organized public hunger strikes and a second occupation of the former Stasi offices, gaining support from the West German Social Democrats (Bock 1999). The existence of the files, victims' access to their files, and some public access (e.g., for scientific purposes), as well as legal prosecution of oppressors were eventually entered into the German unification treaty. Key arguments were that disclosure might foster a process of self-reflection and operate like a “talk therapy” (Rathenow 1990:463), and that knowledge and memory would be indispensable for the pending democratization process (Gauck 1994).

Unlike the period following the collapse of the Third Reich, this time official *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* did not skip a generation—in this vastly different political context, it unfolded immediately. In 1992, the files were opened to the public, and trials and purges (e.g., in universities, police, and military forces) were held. While the wrongdoings of the GDR were not comparable to the atrocities of Nazism, the West German approach of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was a crucial point of reference for dealing with East German history (Lewis 2002:104). The focus was on not repeating previous shortcomings: “Because the Nazi past was not mastered, then at least the Stasi past should be mastered” (Schädlich 1993:9). East German activists claimed that the deliberate ignorance practiced collectively and individually by West Germany after World War II had not been effective in achieving the desired democratic transformation. The legacy of World War II also gained importance in another, unexpected

<sup>5</sup> After reunification, Lothar de Maizière became a minister in Helmut Kohl's government but resigned after he was publicly accused of being IM Czerny (Der Spiegel 1990).

way: Prominent politicians like Gustav Just, the coauthor of Brandenburg's constitution and member of state parliament, were identified through the Stasi files as former Nazis—in Just's case, one who had personally killed six Jews. As the *Washington Post* reported, "Stasi files are believed to contain about 1.5 million names of persons from the Nazi era, including criminals and victims. Most...have never had to face official judgement because of the East German government's insistence that it was the successor to the prewar anti-fascist opposition, while West Germans carried the brunt of the Nazi legacy" (Fisher 1992). What historians later called the "double past," the entanglement of East and West German history (Habermas 1992; Klessmann et al. 1999), also applied to deliberate ignorance: The Stasi files, the vast collective endeavor to find out everything suspicious about GDR citizens, revealed and implied instances of deliberate ignorance of both Nazi and Stasi histories.

The negotiation and debate over the use of the Stasi files was also a power struggle between representatives of the old regime and its critics; at stake were careers, positions, wealth, power, and social status. The public debates and purges can be interpreted as degradation and shaming practices used to delegitimize the GDR and its supporters. While this reorganization of knowledge and ignorance was necessary to overcome the remnants of the GDR and gain justice for its victims, a peaceful way of coexisting with former collaborators<sup>6</sup>—one that offered a delicate balance between disclosure and concealment<sup>7</sup>—was required. Enlightening individuals and citizenry about the misdeeds of the old regime was deemed necessary to install justice, yet at the same time, collectively and legally agreed-upon deliberate ignorance was thought to be a key factor in maintaining social cohesion and peace. Balancing both knowledge and ignorance is a challenge that has spurred debates over the GDR's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* since 1989. These debates on collective remembrance have entered the public sphere and can be reconstructed and studied (Buddensiek 2017), but researchers have paid little attention to the role of deliberate ignorance in individuals' personal struggles over the same trade-off: How much knowledge and how much ignorance should a person have about their past life in the GDR? How much knowledge is needed for a society to uphold social peace, morality, and justice? How much ignorance is essential to social interaction and cohesion?

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<sup>6</sup> The number of collaborators and the categories of collaboration (Who was a collaborator? How should one judge involuntary interactions with the Stasi that resulted in files?) are still highly controversial. For instance, in 1989 there were about 189,000 IMs, but from 1950 to 1989 the Ministry of State Security had registered a total of 624,000 (Gieseke 2001; Müller-Enbergs 1998). Recently the focus of research has shifted to "respondents" (*Auskunftspersonen*); estimates of the number of respondents range between 7%–18% of the population, many of whom were not aware that they had been in contact with the Stasi because agents often used fake identities (Booß and Müller-Enbergs 2014).

<sup>7</sup> For instance, some files have not yet been opened to the public. Personal information of third parties is being redacted to reduce the risk of retaliatory acts.

## **The Stasi Files and Individuals' Reasons for Deliberate Ignorance**

In 1991 the Federal Authority for the Records of the State Security Service of the former Democratic Republic (BStU) was founded to house the Stasi files. Since its inauguration, the BStU has promoted the value of enlightenment and self-determination on individual and collective levels. For instance, in an interview, Roland Jahn, who in 2011 became the head of the BStU and who, as a civil rights activist in the GDR, was repeatedly arrested and eventually expatriated in 1983, explained (Finger 2012):

One should not voluntarily give up the opportunity to know something... I know that from my own experience. When I inspected my files I learned that I was expelled from university because of a tutor's spy report, and that while I was in prison my lawyer Wolfgang Schnur was an informant and not just my counsellor and friend. The Stasi had controlled my life, taken away my self-determination. Knowing that helped me to retrieve the life that had been stolen from me... I was disappointed, but I was no longer deceived. This is how many victims of spying feel; the files frighten them, but also free them.

Like other heads of the BStU (e.g., Joachim Gauck), Jahn has strong normative views about the liberating effects of reading one's file: By doing so, victims of the Stasi are able to recapture their stolen lives and find freedom in truth. Jahn also highlighted the need for secret conflicts to come to light: "The conflict was there. It was just not visible. I can only forgive what I know about. I can only forgive the person I know" (Finger 2012).

Over the years, the BStU's annual reports have thoroughly documented individuals' reasons and experiences of reading their Stasi files, as have many memoirs by civil rights activists (Birthler 2014; Jahn and Wensierski 2005; Schädlich 1993). Much less is known about those who decided not to access their personal files—indeed, even their number is unknown.<sup>8</sup> Why have they chosen deliberate ignorance? Is it an individual expression of what Meier (2010) described as the time-honored practice of taming one's appetite for anger and retaliation? Or do the motives have other roots: fear of shame, distrust of the information in the files, or something else altogether?

To the best of our knowledge, the choice to not read one's Stasi file, this act of deliberate ignorance, has not yet been studied, nor has any similar phenomenon in another transformational society been examined. To fill this void, Hertwig, Ellerbrock, Möwitz, and Dallacker (in preparation) have begun to

<sup>8</sup> The BStU does not know the total number of files, so it cannot estimate the proportion of the population who have or have not accessed their file. According to the BStU, a total of 3,225,676 people (as of December 31, 2018) have asked to see their files (these and the following statistics can be found at <https://www.bstu.de>); this does not mean that they all have a file, however. In about 40% of the cases, the request is a repeated request (estimated on the basis of the statistics between 2011 and 2018). In 2017 and 2018, about 25 years after the files were made available, approximately 55,000 people requested access for the first time. One way to interpret their behavior is that they practiced deliberate ignorance for more than two decades.

empirically study the reasons of those who do not wish to view their records, using surveys and structured oral history interviews; the latter were selected to understand how this personal decision was embedded in social settings and how it might have changed over time due to new political or personal circumstances (e.g., retirement). As work is still under way, we will focus here on the potential reasons that can be discerned from the public record. Many individuals, including some prominent figures, have publicly stated that they have not read their file and have no intention to do so—they have also explained why.

### **Deliberate Ignorance in the Service of Cohesion and Cooperation**

A commonly cited reason for not accessing one's file is that even after the collapse of the GDR, many people had no choice but to continue to work with the same colleagues. Finding out that their colleagues (and possibly friends) had been feeding information to the Stasi would make future collaboration very difficult. This was a concern for Claus Weselsky, a prominent trade union leader. Asked in a radio interview with the Westdeutscher Rundfunk Köln in 2015, whether he had read his file, he answered: "No, I have not because I am quite certain that I would have come across names of people who had been part of my immediate environment. I do not want to know." One interpretation of this justification is that a person "forgets" the sins of the past by forsaking the opportunity to learn who committed them.

### **Deliberate Ignorance in the Service of Protecting Oneself from Shame**

Christa Wolf, one of the most important and acclaimed postwar German writers of the second half of the twentieth century—and perhaps the GDR's most important writer—was both a Stasi victim (with no fewer than 42 volumes in her file) and an informant (one volume). She served as a sporadic informant to the Stasi between 1959 and 1962 and was carefully monitored for many years by the Stasi. It was Wolf herself who eventually published her perpetrator's file (*Täterakte*) after the German media had exposed her past as an IM while she was in Los Angeles (Gitlin 1993). According to her last book, *City of Angels*, the revelation came as a complete surprise to her. She had totally forgotten the collaboration—later calling it "a case for Dr. Freud, a classic case of repression" (Gitlin 1993)—despite being a writer whose work dealt profoundly with Germany's Nazi past and the themes of silence, repression, and denial of knowledge.

Wolf's case illustrates another reason for individual deliberate ignorance. Assuming that a person has not simply forgotten about past behaviors that they would now perceive as shameful or humiliating—including complicity, infidelity, ideological wrongheadedness, and the betrayal of family and friends—that person may choose not to relive them. Deliberate ignorance may serve as a tool to keep one's past behavior a secret from others and even from oneself

and protect oneself from shame, profound cognitive dissonance (Golman et al. 2017), and the threat to one's self-perceived identity posed by unwanted memories.

### **Deliberate Ignorance in the Service of Protecting Oneself from Great Betrayal and Regret**

Reading a file can feel terrible. One of the most famous cases of this experience is that of Vera Lengsfeld, a civil rights activist in the GDR. Her file contained reports from more than 60 Stasi agents and informers. One of the sources, however, was special, delivering detailed, even intimate knowledge of her private life. His code name was Donald. He was her husband. Others have had similar experiences: The writer Hans Joachim Schädlich found out that his elder brother had informed on him; the actor Ulrich Mühe, who played a Stasi officer in the film *The Lives of Others* (2006), believed to have found evidence that, along with four of his fellow actors at East Berlin's Deutsches Theater, his own wife had informed on him (though he lost his case against his then ex-wife in court). People who suspect that family members or close friends had informed on them may decide not to risk confirming their suspicions. In addition, the public suffering of people like Vera Lengsfeld has led others to choose to not read their file (Finger 2012).

### **Deliberate Ignorance in the Service of Preserving One's Identity**

Vera Lengsfeld changed her name from Vera Wollenberger after her devastating discovery and subsequent divorce. Indeed, nobody who read their own Stasi files stayed the same. This was true for victims, perpetrators, and everyone in between. As reported by Gitlin (1993) in the *New York Times*, Christa Wolf stated:

The point now is not to justify or to excuse, but to explain this to myself...It horrifies me that there is a language in these files, a sort of Stasi language, that I myself was speaking, and that I can no longer identify with at all.

Deliberate ignorance can be a way to avoid painful questions: Who was I then? Who am I today? It may also preserve the illusion that even in times of profound upheaval, a person can remain unchanged.

### **Deliberate Ignorance as Resistance against the Claim to Truth**

For Timothy Garton Ash, reading his file was an intellectual delight: "But what a gift to memory is a Stasi file. Far better than a madeleine" (Garton Ash 1997:12). This may not be surprising because as a British citizen, Garton Ash did not suffer dire consequences to his personal well-being as a result of his surveillance by the Stasi, which occurred during his visits to the GDR. His

delight, so it appears, was also not tainted by suspicions although they are part of historians' professional DNA. Historians are well aware of the limitations of any kind of historical source and are especially sensitive to the trustworthiness of secret service files; they know that these files are profoundly shaped by context and the myriad interests of the bookkeepers (Großbölting and Kittel 2019). A similar awareness also moved West German writer and Nobel Prize laureate Günter Grass. Having been a victim of unrelenting surveillance by the Stasi (his file contained over 1,200 pages), he was critical of the decision to open the files and reveal who cooperated with the secret police in East Germany. For good reasons, Grass (cited in Schlüter 2012) deeply mistrusted the claim to truth that was attributed to the content of the files and refused for many years to read his:

These Stasi files were like a poison because they were seen as valid documents. What they said had to be true. This cast suspicion on an excessive number of people—often with good reason, but, unfortunately, often without—because people trusted the statements and did not consider that large parts were exaggerated or even made up.

Grass asked critical questions about the source of the information, thus denying the Stasi the power to retrospectively destroy his friendships with East German writers. In particular, he did not feel entitled to judge the difficult decisions that informants may have faced. Most East Germans with firsthand Stasi experiences shared this perspective. As Vera Lengsfeld explained, “reading one’s Stasi files is like looking in a distorting mirror” (Wollenberger 1992).

The Stasi files do not offer knowledge, but rather information, which must be laboriously contextualized (Jones 2009). This prompts new questions and uncertainties. The files are not themselves a source of truth, and while they may ultimately lead to knowledge, they may also prompt further confusion. In this respect deliberate ignorance may be an option for stepping out of the relentless turmoil of ignorance and knowledge in times of transformation.

### **Deliberate Ignorance as Resistance against Absolute and Hypocritical Norms**

Another reason for the decision not to read one’s file, which emerged in the interviews and surveys analyzed by Hertwig et al. (in preparation), is the refusal to participate in what some perceived as collective shaming, an act of hypocrisy by the victors of the Cold War, or an expression of neocolonial Western attitudes toward the East. In the years following German reunification, the view on life in East Germany was binary and inflexible. That people may have been both a victim and an informant (as in Wolf’s case) was not accepted, nor was the fact that the Stasi files included many different, partly overlapping, categories of informant and victim. For the sake of sensationalism and melodrama, things had to be either black or white (Lewis 2002:106). In the light of this

absolute normativity, deliberate ignorance was a tool for escaping a potential witch hunt or for simply avoiding rigid judgments that did not correspond to one's experience of life in the GDR.

In the interviews, people who were, or still are, committed socialists, people who identified with the GDR's *Weltanschauung*, and people who worked in positions that required loyalty to the state typically expressed this rationale. In the eyes of these individuals, there is no essential difference between the intelligence agencies of a state like the GDR and those of Western capitalist states such as the United States, the United Kingdom, or West Germany. Indeed, states have secret services and they are interested in collecting data on citizens deemed to be suspicious. Garton Ash (1997:235) stressed the arbitrary nature of judging the morality of spying on one's citizens: "Good when done for a free country, bad when done for a dictatorship? Right for us, wrong for them." In the eyes of some, opening the Stasi files was an act of hypocrisy, and not reading one's file is a protest against the debasement of East Germany and its citizens.

The public record as well as the initial results of Hertwig et al.'s surveys and interviews demonstrate that there is no single motive behind choosing to remain ignorant about one's Stasi files. Instead, reasons for deliberate ignorance come in many shapes and sizes, including shielding oneself from traumatic experiences or fearing an inability to trust others. This has interesting implications for modeling deliberate ignorance and raises the question of whether the wealth of distinct motives can be captured by one single modeling framework (for more on this, see Brown and Walasek, this volume).

We conclude our brief treatment of the collective and individual memory and desire to (not) know in transformational societies with a set of propositions.

### **Deliberate Ignorance in the Memory Politics during Transformational Periods**

*Proposition 1:* Deliberate ignorance has always been an element of memory politics. It is even present in the Enlightenment-based twentieth-century approach of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which prioritizes knowledge, remembrance, and disclosure. This means that the premodern and modern approaches of dealing with a harrowing past do not represent categorically distinct attitudes—rather, they differ in how they blend and prioritize knowledge and deliberate ignorance.

*Proposition 2:* Deliberate ignorance is a dialectical tool that, due to the intimate link between knowledge and power, can be used either to stabilize a regime's power or to delegitimize a regime by undermining personal trust and institutional confidence.

*Proposition 3:* In the process of disclosing the secrets and sins of the previous regime, deliberate ignorance can modulate the pace of change, slowing it and even creating revisionist effects. Since disclosure often disrupts political and social structures, deliberate ignorance may help preserve peace and social cohesion. Deliberate ignorance's dialectical nature, and the conditions under which it is likely to have beneficial or detrimental effects for individuals and societies, is worth studying.

*Proposition 4:* Following Ricoeur's (2006) demonstration that memories can be creative, we claim that deliberate ignorance is highly productive and has the power to invent social orders and individual identities. Simmel (1908/1992) highlighted the power of secrecy in forming groups and Popitz (2016) stressed the power of ignorance to modulate conflict and maintain norms. Building on these lines of arguments, the productive effects of deliberate ignorance require analysis.

*Proposition 5:* The official memory politics of some contemporary transformational societies, such as Spain after Franco, have given greater space to ignorance and forgetting, while others, like postapartheid South Africa, have based their policy on memory and reconciliation. This diversity has emerged despite procedures of transitional justice institutionalized in supranational organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union since the 1980s, even though postconflict trials, truth commissions, and retribution have been concluded to produce a more durable peace (Buckley-Zistel 2014; Lie et al. 2012).<sup>9</sup>

*Proposition 6:* Official collective memory politics and individuals' knowledge preferences need not concur. This can be seen in the way Germans have reckoned with aspects of their collective, and sometimes personal, Nazi history and with Stasi files personal to their families. The prevalence of deliberate ignorance in these contexts, however, is largely unknown and requires empirical study.

*Proposition 7:* Germany's collective memory politics underwent drastic changes throughout the twentieth century. Individual memory politics also seem to be malleable and dynamic across time. For instance, in 2018, 26,875 new requests to view Stasi files were made—26 years after the files became available. The reasons behind such late changes of heart have not yet been studied. The case of Schnibben (2014), who researched and revealed his parents' Nazi past only after their death, suggests that distinct changes in an individual's

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<sup>9</sup> Transitional justice must master the dilemma of "not trading off peace for justice or justice for peace" (Williams and Nagy 2012:5). Speaking the truth, revealing atrocities, and establishing memorial narratives that include the victims and their suffering are commonly accepted as indispensable steps toward establishing trust in new democratic regimes (Buckley-Zistel and Schäfer 2014), despite the fact that these measures sometimes fail to break the cycle of violence (Anderson 2018:168–171).

proximate social network through death, illness, or divorce may trigger new knowledge preferences. We suggest that deliberate ignorance, like memory (Dessingué and Winter 2016; Rothberg 2009), is a highly dynamic concept that can change over time as well as according to social, political, and individual circumstances.

*Proposition 8:* Preserving peace and social cohesion in one's proximate social environment has been identified as one reason for deliberate ignorance on the individual level (von Hodenberg 2018). Yet the motives for individual deliberate ignorance appear to be substantially more diverse, spanning a wide range of concerns, motives, and contingencies. These await classification and a full understanding of the underlying psychology.

*Proposition 9:* Collective memory politics offer strong normative claims about what is good for a society in transition. As the discussions in Meier (2010) and Rieff (2017) demonstrate, the issue of the normative implications of deliberate ignorance is far from settled. The normative issues that naturally emerge on the level of individual deliberate ignorance are even less understood (see also Krueger et al., this volume).

## Summary

Deliberate ignorance on a social level can serve to deny the past or avoid responsibility and accountability, but it can also foster peace and cooperation. Political philosophers from Machiavelli to Rousseau described securing peace as the first and most essential task of government. This is particularly relevant for transitional societies, where peace is necessary for reconciliation: Information and truth are indispensable to human rights, public criticism is necessary to uncover corruption and exploitation, transparency is crucial for fair procedures, and knowledge is essential to justice. But truth and information executed as absolute principles may result in a climate of anger, hatred, and vengeance. Deliberate ignorance can be a tool for helping to balance and regulate the disruptive effects that a flood of knowledge may bring. Deliberate ignorance has a profoundly dialectical nature—let us no longer ignore it.

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