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Zersetzung

Zersetzung (German; variously translated as *decomposition*, *corrosion*, *undermining*, *biodegradation* or *dissolution*) is a psychological warfare technique that was first used by Nazi Germany as part of the accusation Wehrkraftzersetzung against political opponents (which typically resulted in death penalties). Decades later, during the Honecker era, the Stasi, the East German secret police used the accusation *Zersetzung* to silence political opponents by repression.

The "measures of *Zersetzung*", defined in the framework of a directive on police procedures in 1976,^[1] were used in the context of so-called "operational procedures" (in German *Operative Vorgänge* or *OV*). They replaced the overt terror of the Ulbricht era.

The practice of repression in *Zersetzung* comprised extensive and secret methods of control and psychological manipulation, including personal relationships of the target, for which the Stasi relied on its network of informal collaborators,^[2] (in German *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* or *IM*), the State's power over institutions, and on operational psychology. Using targeted psychological attacks the Stasi tried to deprive a dissident of any chance of a "hostile action".

The use of *Zersetzung* is well documented due to numerous Stasi files published after East Germany's Wende. Several thousands or up to 10,000 individuals are estimated to have become victims,^{[3]:217} 5,000 of whom sustained irreversible damage.^[4] Pensions for restitution have been created for the victims.

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Definition

The Stasi, or Ministry for State Security (German: Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, MfS) by its full name, defined *Zersetzung* in its 1985 dictionary of political operatives as

"...a method of operation by the Ministry for State Security for an efficacious struggle against subversive activities, particularly in the treatment of operations. With *Zersetzung* one can influence hostile and negative individuals across different operational political activities, especially the hostile and negative aspects of their dispositions and beliefs, so these are abandoned and changed little by little, and, if applicable, the contradictions and differences between the hostile and negative forces would be laid open, exploited, and reinforced.

The goal of *Zersetzung* is the fragmentation, paralysis, disorganization, and isolation of the hostile and negative forces, in order to preventatively impede the hostile and negative activities, to largely restrict, or to totally avert them, and if applicable to prepare the ground for a political and ideological reestablishment.

Zersetzung is equally an immediate constitutive element of "operational procedures" and other preventive activities to impede hostile gatherings. The principal forces to execute *Zersetzung* are the unofficial collaborators. *Zersetzung* presupposes information and significant proof of hostile activities planned, prepared, and accomplished as well as anchor points corresponding to measures of *Zersetzung*.

Zersetzung must be produced on the basis of a root cause analysis of the facts and the exact definition of a concrete goal. *Zersetzung* must be executed in a uniform and supervised manner; its results must be documented.

The political explosive force of *Zersetzung* heightens demands regarding the maintenance of secrecy."^[5]

Political context

During its first decade of existence the German Democratic Republic (GDR) subdued political opposition primarily through the penal code, by accusing them of incitement to war or of calls of boycott.^[6] To counteract the international isolation of the GDR due to the construction of the Berlin wall in 1963, judicial terror was abandoned.^[7] Since the debut of the Erich Honecker era in 1971 in particular, the Stasi intensified its efforts to punish dissident behaviors without using the penal code.^[8] Important motives were the GDR's desire for international recognition and rapprochement with West Germany at the end of the 1960s. In fact the GDR was committed to adhere to the U.N. Charter^[9] and the Helsinki accords^[10] as well as the Basic Treaty, 1972 signed with the Federal Republic of Germany,^[11] to respect human rights, or at least announce its intention as such. The regime of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany thus decided to reduce the number of political prisoners, which was compensated for by practicing repression without imprisonment or court judgements.^{[12][13]}

In practice

The Stasi used *Zersetzung* essentially as a means of psychological oppression and persecution.^[14] Findings of operational psychology^[15] were formulated into method at the Stasi's College of Law (*Juristische Hochschule der Staatssicherheit*, or *JHS*), and applied to political opponents in an effort to undermine their self-confidence and self-esteem. Operations were designed to intimidate and destabilise them by subjecting them to repeated disappointment, and to socially alienate them by interfering with and disrupting their relationships with others as in social undermining. The aim was to induce personal crises in victims, leaving them too unnerved and psychologically distressed to have the time and energy for anti-government activism.^[16] The Stasi intentionally concealed their role as mastermind of the operations.^{[17][18]} Author Jürgen Fuchs was a victim of *Zersetzung* and wrote about his experience, describing the Stasi's actions as “psychosocial crime”, and “an assault on the human soul”.^[16]

Although its techniques had been established effectively by the late 1950s, *Zersetzung* was not defined in terms of a scientific method until the mid-1970s, and only then began to be carried out in a systematic manner in the 1970s and 1980s.^[19] It is difficult to determine how many people were targeted, since the sources have been deliberately and considerably redacted; it is known, however, that tactics varied in scope, and that a number of different departments implemented them. Overall there was a ratio of four or five authorised *Zersetzung* operators for each targeted group, and three for each individual.^[20] Some sources indicate that around 5,000 people were “persistently victimised” by *Zersetzung*.^[4] At the College of Legal Studies, the number of dissertations submitted on the subject of *Zersetzung* was in double figures.^[21] It also had a comprehensive 50-page *Zersetzung* teaching manual, which included numerous examples of its practice.^[22]

Implementing institutions

Almost all Stasi departments were involved in *Zersetzung* operations, although first and foremost amongst these was the headquarters of the Stasi's directorate *XX (Hauptabteilung XX)* in Berlin, and its divisional offices in regional and municipal government. The function of the headquarters and *Abteilung XXs* was to maintain surveillance of religious communities; cultural and media establishments; alternative political parties; the GDR's many political establishment-affiliated mass social organisations; sport; and education and health services - effectively covering all aspects of civic life.^[23] The Stasi made use of the means available to them within, and as a circumstance of, the GDR's closed social system. An established, politically motivated collaborative network (*politisch-operatives Zusammenwirken*, or *POZW*) provided them with extensive opportunities for interference in such situations as the sanctioning of professionals and students, expulsion from associations and sports clubs, and occasional arrests by the *Volkspolizei*^[17] (the GDR's quasi-military national police). Refusal of permits for travel to socialist states, or denial of entry at Czechoslovakian and Polish border crossings where no visa requirement existed, were also arranged. The various collaborators (*Partnern des operativen Zusammenwirkens*) included branches of regional government, university and professional management, housing administrative bodies, the *Sparkasse* public savings bank, and in some cases head physicians.^[24] The Stasi's *Linie III (Observation)*, *Abteilung 26* (Telephone and room surveillance) and *M* (Postal communications) departments provided essential background information for the designing of *Zersetzung* techniques, with *Abteilung 32* procuring the required technology.^[25]

The Stasi collaborated with the secret services of other Eastern Bloc countries to implement *Zersetzung*. One such example was the Polish secret services co-operating against branches of the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation in the early 1960s,^[26] which would come to be known^[27] as "*innere Zersetzung*"^[28] (internal subversion).

Against individuals

The Stasi applied *Zersetzung* before, during, after, or instead of incarcerating the targeted individual. The "operational procedures" did not have as an aim, in general, to gather evidence for charges against the target, nor to be able to begin criminal prosecutions. The Stasi considered the "measures of *Zersetzung*" rather in part as an instrument that was used when judiciary procedures were not convenient, or for political reasons such as the international image of the GDR.^{[29][30]} In certain cases, the Stasi attempted meanwhile to knowingly inculcate an individual, as for example in the case of Wolf Biermann: The Stasi set him up with minors, hoping that he would allow himself to be seduced, and that they could then pursue criminal charges.^[31] The crimes that they researched for such accusations were non-political, as for example drug possession, trafficking in customs or currencies, theft, financial fraud, and rape.^[32]

The proven forms of *Zersetzung* are described in the directive 1/76:

a systematic degradation of reputation, image, and prestige in a database on one part true, verifiable and degrading, and on the other part false, plausible, irrefutable, and always degrading; a systematic organization of social and professional failures for demolishing the self-confidence of the individual; [...] stimulation of doubts with respect to perspectives on the future; stimulation of mistrust or mutual suspicion among groups [...]; putting in place spatial and temporal obstacles rendering impossible or at least difficult the reciprocal relations of a group [...], for example by [...] assigning distant workplaces. —Directive No. 1/76 of January 1976 for the development of "operational procedures".^[34]

Beginning with intelligence obtained by espionage, the Stasi established "sociograms" and "psychograms" which it applied for the psychological forms of *Zersetzung*. They exploited personal traits, such as homosexuality, as well as supposed character weaknesses of the targeted individual — for example a professional failure, negligence of parental duties, pornographic interests, divorce, alcoholism, dependence on medications, criminal tendencies, passion for a collection or a game, or contacts with circles of the extreme right — or even the veil of shame from the rumors poured out upon one's circle of acquaintances.^{[35][36]} From the point of view of the Stasi, the measures were the most fruitful when they were applied in connection with a personality; all "schematism" had to be avoided.^[35]

...the Stasi often used a method which was really diabolic. It was called *Zersetzung*, and it's described in another guideline. The word is difficult to translate because it means originally "biodegradation." But actually, it's a quite accurate description. The goal was to destroy secretly the self-confidence of people, for example by damaging their reputation, by organizing failures in their work, and by destroying their personal relationships. Considering this, East Germany was a very modern dictatorship. The Stasi didn't try to arrest every dissident. It preferred to paralyze them, and it could do so because it had access to so much personal information and to so many institutions.

—Hubertus Knabe, German historian ^[33]

Moreover, methods of *Zersetzung* included espionage, overt, hidden, and feigned; opening letters and listening to telephone calls; encroachments on private property; manipulation of vehicles; and even poisoning food and using false medications.^[37] Certain collaborators of the Stasi tacitly took into account the suicide of victims of *Zersetzung*.^[38]

It has not been definitely established that the Stasi used X-rays to provoke long-term health problems in its opponents.^[39] That said, Rudolf Bahro, Gerulf Pannach, and Jürgen Fuchs, three important dissidents who had been imprisoned at the same time, died of cancer within an interval of two years.^[40] A study by the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former GDR (*Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* or *BStU*) has meanwhile rejected on the basis of extant documents such as fraudulent use of X-rays, and only mentions isolated and unintentional cases of the harmful use of sources of radiation, for example to mark documents.^[41]

In the name of the target, the Stasi made little announcements, ordered products, and made emergency calls, to terrorize him/her.^{[42][43]} To threaten or intimidate or cause psychoses the Stasi assured itself of access to the target's living quarters and left visible traces of its presence, by adding, removing, and modifying objects.^[32]

Against groups and social relations

The Stasi manipulated relations of friendship, love, marriage, and family by anonymous letters, telegrams and telephone calls as well as compromising photos, often altered.^[44] In this manner, parents and children were supposed to systematically become strangers to one another.^[45] To provoke conflicts and extramarital relations the Stasi put in place targeted seductions by Romeo agents.^[31]

For the *Zersetzung* of groups, it infiltrated them with unofficial collaborators, sometimes minors.^[46] The work of opposition groups was hindered by permanent counter-propositions and discord on the part of unofficial collaborators when making decisions.^[47] To sow mistrust within the group, the Stasi made believe that certain members were unofficial collaborators; moreover by spreading rumors and manipulated photos,^[48] the Stasi feigned indiscretions with unofficial collaborators, or placed members of targeted groups in administrative posts to make believe that this was a reward for the activity of an unofficial collaborator.^[31] They even aroused suspicions regarding certain members of the group by assigning privileges, such as housing or a personal car.^[31] Moreover, the imprisonment of only certain members of the group gave birth to suspicions.^[47]

Methods

Tactics employed under *Zersetzung* generally involved the disruption of the victim's private or family life. This often included psychological attacks, such as breaking into homes and subtly manipulating the contents, in a form of gaslighting – moving furniture, altering the timing of an alarm, removing pictures from walls or replacing one variety of tea with another. Other practices included property damage, sabotage of cars, purposely incorrect medical treatment, smear campaigns including sending falsified compromising photos or documents to the victim's family, denunciation, provocation, psychological warfare, psychological subversion, wiretapping, bugging, mysterious phone calls or unnecessary deliveries, even including sending a vibrator to a target's wife.

Returning items from the trash to the home, releasing mice or poisonous snakes (especially those whose poison works on contact and need not be injected) in walls or basements and alluding to topics referenced in tapped phone conversations is also popular, as is filling both the salt and pepper shakers with 'pepper'; (in a controlled or export economy, as in times of economic hardship generally, ersatz pepper is typically made of sawdust-type substitutes such as bark or for example 'winter pepper'; see especially 'witzpulver' but also 'monk's pepper'). Usually, victims had no idea that the Stasi were responsible and indeed, it is probable that they not always were. Many thought that they were losing their minds, and mental breakdowns and suicide could result. The 'dissolution' is likely at least occasionally intended to carry the same connotation as in such uses as 'dissolution of marriage,' 'breakdown of the traditional family unit,' etc. It should perhaps be noted further that no one had a monopoly on monitoring communications, whether in East Germany or anywhere else.

Target groups for measures

The Stasi used *Zersetzung* tactics on individuals and groups. There was no particular homogeneous target group, as opposition in the GDR came from a number of different sources. Tactical plans were thus separately adapted to each perceived threat.^[49] The Stasi nevertheless defined several main target groups:^[17]

- associations of people making collective visa applications for travel abroad
- artists' groups critical of the government
- religious opposition groups
- youth subculture groups
- groups supporting the above (human rights and peace organisations, those assisting illegal departure from the GDR, and expatriate and defector movements).

The Stasi also occasionally used *Zersetzung* on non-political organisations regarded as undesirable, such as the Watchtower Society.^[50]

Prominent individuals targeted by *Zersetzung* operations included Jürgen Fuchs, Gerulf Pannach, Rudolf Bahro, Robert Havemann, Rainer Eppelmann, Reiner Kunze, husband and wife Gerd and Ulrike Poppe, and Wolfgang Templin.

Social and juridicial process

Once aware of his own status as a target, GDR opponent Wolfgang Templin tried, with some success, to bring details of the Stasi's *Zersetzung* activities to the attention of western journalists.^[51] In 1977 *Der Spiegel* published a five-part article series, "*Du sollst zerbrechen!*" ("You're going to crack!"), by the exiled Jürgen Fuchs, in which he describes the Stasi's "operational psychology". The Stasi tried to discredit Fuchs and the contents of similar articles, publishing in turn claims that he had a paranoid view of its function,^[52] and intending that *Der Spiegel* and other media would assume he was suffering from a persecution complex.^{[51][53]} This, however, was refuted by the official Stasi documents examined after *Die Wende* (the political power shift in the GDR in 1989-90).

Because the scale and nature of *Zersetzung* were unknown both to the general population of the GDR and to people abroad, revelations of the Stasi's malicious tactics were met with some degree of disbelief by those affected.^[54] Many still nowadays express incomprehension at how the Stasi's collaborators could have participated in such inhuman actions.^[54]

Since *Zersetzung* as a whole, even after 1990, was not deemed to be illegal because of the principle of *nulla poena sine lege* (no penalty without law), actions against involvement in either its planning or implementation were not enforceable by the courts.^[55] Because this specific legal definition of *Zersetzung* as a crime didn't exist,^[56] only individual instances of its tactics could be reported. Acts which even according to GDR law were offences (such as the violation of *Briefgeheimnis*, the secrecy of correspondence) needed to have been reported to the GDR authorities soon after having been committed in order not to be subject to a statute of limitations clause.^[57] Many of the victims experienced the additional complication that the Stasi was not identifiable as the originator in cases of personal injury and misadventure. Official documents in which *Zersetzung* methods were recorded often had no validity in court, and the Stasi had many files detailing its actual implementation destroyed.^[58]

Unless they had been detained for at least 180 days, survivors of *Zersetzung* operations, in accordance with §17a of a 1990 rehabilitation act (the *Strafrechtlichen Rehabilitierungsgesetzes*, or *StrRehaG*), are not eligible for financial compensation. Cases of provable, systematically effected targeting by the Stasi, and resulting in employment-related losses and/or health damage, can be pursued under a law covering settlement of torts (*Unrechtsbereinigungsgesetz*, or *2. SED-UnBerG*) as claims either for occupational rehabilitation or rehabilitation under administrative law. These overturn certain administrative provisions of GDR institutions and affirm their unconstitutionality. This is a condition for the social equalisation payments specified in the *Bundesversorgungsgesetz* (the war victims relief act of 1950). Equalisation payments of pension damages and for loss of earnings can also be applied for in cases where victimisation continued for at least three years, and where claimants can prove need.^[59] The above examples of seeking justice have, however, been hindered by various difficulties victims have experienced, both in providing proof of the Stasi's encroachment into the areas of health, personal assets, education and employment, and in receiving official acknowledgement that the Stasi was responsible for personal damages (including psychic injury) as a direct result of *Zersetzung* operations.^[60]

Use of similar techniques in other countries

Throughout the 1960's and 70's the American FBI came to fully appreciate and utilize *Zersetzung* against perceived "subversives." Martin Luther King was a regular target of public scorn, innuendo and other active measures by Edgar Hoover's FBI.^[61]

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia's security and intelligence agencies were reported to use similar actions against foreign diplomats and journalists in Russia and other ex-USSR states.^{[62][63]}

As applied by the Stasi, *Zersetzung* is a technique to subvert and undermine an opponent. The aim was to disrupt the target's private or family life so they are unable to continue their "hostile-negative" activities towards the state. Typically, the Stasi would use collaborators to garner details from a victim's private life. They would then devise a strategy to "disintegrate" the target's personal circumstances – their career, their relationship with their spouse, their reputation in the community. They would even seek to alienate them from their children. Pingel-Schliemann cites the case of Herr J. First Herr J lost his driver's licence. Months later he found anonymous notes insulting him hanging on the trees of his village. Then rumours circulated that he was cheating on his wife. At work Herr J faced growing problems. Finally, the police arrested him and sentenced him for a theft he didn't commit. To Herr J, these events were disturbing, random and

inexplicable. He had no inkling that the Stasi were behind them. The security service's goal was to use Zersetzung to "switch off" regime opponents. After months and even years of Zersetzung a victim's domestic problems grew so large, so debilitating, and so psychologically burdensome that they would lose the will to struggle against the East German state. Best of all, the Stasi's role in the victim's personal misfortunes remained tantalisingly hidden. The Stasi operations were carried out in complete operational secrecy. The service acted like an unseen and malevolent god, manipulating the destinies of its victims.

— Luke Harding, *Mafia State: How one reporter became an enemy of the brutal new Russia*

In 2016, Zersetzung-like harassment was reported by the American press as carried out by Russia's secret services against U.S. diplomats posted in Moscow as well as in unspecified "several other European capitals"; the U.S. government's efforts to raise the issue with the Kremlin were said to have brought no positive reaction.^[64] The Russian Embassy's reply was cited by *The Washington Post* as implicitly admitting and defending the harassment as a response to what Russia called U.S. provocations and mistreatment of Russian diplomats in the United States.^[64] The Russian Foreign Ministry's spokesperson in turn accused the U.S.' FBI and CIA of provocations and "psychological pressure" vis-a-vis the Russian diplomats.^[65]

See also

- Abusive power and control
- Active measures
- COINTELPRO
- Destabilisation
- Electronic harassment
- Gaslighting
- JTRIG
- Microaggression
- Mind control
- Mind games
- Mobbing
- Psychological warfare
- Stasi

Further reading

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