



Why people choose deliberate ignorance in times of societal transformation

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ABSTRACT

The opening of East Germany's Stasi archives in 1991 has often been lauded as a model of transparency in a transformative period. Yet many citizens have rejected the opportunity to read their files. To examine the reasons people invoke for this deliberate ignorance, we combined survey methods from psychology with historiographical methodologies. Our findings reveal a diverse range of reasons for deliberate ignorance, including regulation of negative emotions, avoidance of personal conflict, scepticism about the information compiled, and rejection of the victorious political system's authority over the files. Participants thus appear to prioritise cooperation and harmony over justice concerns—in stark contrast to the institutional norm of transparency and justice. Shining a light on the role of deliberate ignorance at the individual level—and specifically the convergence or divergence of individual and collective memory culture—may help explain the pace of societal change.

Humans have long been assumed to have a boundless thirst for knowledge (see [Hertwig & Engel, 2016](#)). But there are some things that people just do not want to know. Deliberate ignorance—the choice not to know—has recently received growing attention in psychology (e.g., [Gigerenzer & Garcia-Retamero, 2017](#); [Hertwig & Engel, 2016](#)), economics (where it is often dubbed “information avoidance”; e.g., [Golman, Hagman, & Loewenstein, 2017](#)), neuroscience (e.g., [Charpentier, Bromberg-Martin, & Sharot, 2018](#)), the social sciences (e.g., [Gross & McGoey, 2015](#)), and public policy making ([Hertwig & Engel, 2020](#)). In this article, we examine deliberate ignorance in the context of societal transformation after German reunification. Facing information about their past that could have ramifications for their present and future, many people have decided they simply do not want to know.

Any society experiencing a fundamental transition—moving from war to peace, from revolution to social concord, from dictatorship to democracy, or from liberal democracy to authoritarianism—must develop a way to interpret, remember, or ignore past experiences in order to legitimise present and future choices. Collective memory regimes are formed, interpreted, and disseminated by collectives and institutions according to their interests. In memory politics, which deals with “who wants whom to remember what, and why” ([Confino, 1997](#), p. 1393), there are various approaches: at one end of the spectrum, deliberately ignoring the misdeeds of the past in order to stabilise power and avoid conflict; at the other end, remembering them in order to pursue justice and prevent the defeated ideology from resurging. These

two approaches can also blend and coexist in hybrid regimes of remembering certain crimes and ignoring others (see [Ellerbrock & Hertwig, 2021](#)).

Some historical periods are associated more closely with one or the other approach. For instance, [Meier \(2010\)](#) has argued that ancient societies approached memory politics with a focus on forgetting and the choice to not know. A collective veil of ignorance was seen as indispensable for establishing a new society in which perpetrators, followers, and victims of the old system could coexist. Investigating, publicising, sanctioning, or even acknowledging the sins of the past risked perpetual discord, and so only the elites of the defeated regimes were held accountable.

The French Revolution, which sparked the codification of human rights, was pivotal for the remembrance approach, according to which present and future generations must know and remember the past to avoid repeating it. Human rights violations were seen as crimes to be prosecuted rather than ignored. Although remembrance currently seems to be the predominant model of memory politics (e.g., establishing truth commissions has become “almost routine and standard practice”; [Fischer, 2011](#), p. 410), a range of approaches can be seen in modern societies. For example, whereas South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigated human rights violations perpetrated during apartheid ([Meiring, 2014](#)), post-Franco Spain granted blanket amnesty to both the perpetrators and victims of Franquist repression ([Boyd, 2008](#)). The approach taken may change over time: Germany wished to

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‘forget’ its responsibility for the horrors of the Holocaust in the decades immediately after World War II (Weckel, 2016), but since the late 1960s a culture of remembrance has developed within Germany (Assmann, 2016; Erl, 2011; Minow, 2003; Roth, 2012; Tismaneanu & Jacob, 2015) and beyond. Hybrid regimes remembering certain crimes while ignoring others also exist. For example, contemporary Germany strives to keep the Holocaust at the centre of its memory culture, but until recently ignored its role in colonial genocide.¹

People’s individual choices of how to deal with the past unfold against the background of collective memory politics. However, because the rise of memory studies (the “memory wave”; Kansteiner, 2002, p. 179) has thus far focused on the collective level, little is known about how societal transformations impact individual decisions on whether and how to remember the past. In Germany, for example, although there has been extensive research into people’s denial of their support for or active complicity in the crimes of the Nazi regime (e.g., Bird, Fulbrook, & Wagner, 2016), the individual motives behind this denial have hardly come into focus. In order to fully understand remembrance dynamics in periods of social transition, it is crucial to consider personal choices and how they relate to the prevailing memory politics: How do people decide whether or not to engage with the past and what role do change and stability in the social and political environment play in these decisions?

As a first step toward addressing these questions, we highlight an important psychological phenomenon on the individual level: *deliberate ignorance*, the personal choice not to know in situations where the marginal acquisition costs of the information are relatively small but the potential benefits are large (Hertwig & Engel, 2016, 2020).² This choice echoes aspects of collective memory politics at the individual level. However, it is likely to be influenced not by the possible repercussions the knowledge could have on society, but by the potential effects on the individual and their family, friends, and colleagues. To delve deeper into the reasons people in transformational societies invoke when deciding against engaging with the past, we took advantage of a well-documented process of political transformation that was, and to the best of our knowledge still is, “without precedent” (Garton Ash, 1997, p. 23): The opening of the Stasi files represents a real-life laboratory for investigating individual remembrance against the background of collective memory politics.³

1. Opening the stasi files

The German Democratic Republic (GDR), also known as East Germany, was essentially a one-party state ruled by the Socialist Unity Party (SED). The state went to extraordinary lengths to control its citizens. The Ministry for State Security—commonly known as the Stasi—wiretapped, bugged, and tracked East Germans on a massive scale (Dennis, 2003). By 1989, it had about 91,000 full-time employees and about 200,000 “unofficial collaborators” (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*).⁴

¹ Current debates on memory cultures at both national and international levels (see, e.g., Großbölting, 2021; Rothberg, 2009; Sandkühler, Epple, & Zimmerer, 2021) have focused on the relationship between remembrance and ignorance, the comparability of historical events (e.g., was the Holocaust unique or can it be meaningfully compared with other genocides?), and the practices of remembrance and ownership of plundered historical artefacts (e.g., the Benin bronzes).

² Deliberate ignorance is different from the suppression (or denial) of unwanted memories and knowledge (Anderson & Green, 2001). In the latter case, the person has already acquired information that is then suppressed; in the former, available information is, by choice, not sought. It is also different from strategically produced ignorance on the collective level (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008).

³ For the study of the role of not knowing in its various manifestations, see Gross and McGoey (2015), Lässig (2016), and Wehling (2015).

⁴ These estimates are subject to discussion (Münkel, n.d.; Gieseke, 2001; Müller-Enbergs, 1998).

After the collapse of the GDR in 1989, and pressured by the East German civil rights movement and its insistence on transparency, the reunified German parliament passed legislation (“Stasiunterlagengesetz”; enacted on 29 December 1991) that opened the vast archive of files collected by the Stasi.⁵ People could view their files by applying to the Federal Authority for the Records of the State Security Service of the Former Democratic Republic (the BStU).

As of 31 December 2020—almost three decades after the BStU was founded—nearly 2.17 million citizens had applied to view their files (“Erstanträge”; Der Bundesbeauftragte, 2021, p. 28); in about two-fifths of cases no documents were found.⁶ While several of the BStU’s annual reports cursorily mention individuals’ reasons for viewing their files,⁷ little is known about those who decided against accessing their files—indeed, even their number is unknown. Yet they may represent the majority. The total number of files is difficult to estimate given that the Stasi regularly disposed of files and, immediately after the fall of the Wall, frantically shredded whole boxes of them. One estimate of how many people have not accessed their file starts from the premise that only those citizens who thought there might be a file on them would apply. To gauge the size of this group, Dallacker, Ellerbrock, & Hertwig, 2021 conducted a representative survey of 2317 respondents who had lived in the GDR and—to increase the probability that a file existed—were at least 25 years old when the Berlin Wall fell. Of those, 973 (42%) thought a file might exist (“yes, certainly,” “yes, fairly certainly,” “yes, perhaps”), 356 (15.4%) did not (“no, definitely not”), and 988 (42.6%) did not know. Of those who thought that a file might exist, only 28% (277 out of 973) had applied to view it. Extrapolating from these results, one may estimate that roughly two-fifths of adult GDR citizens (aged 18 years and older in 1989) thought that a file on them might exist. Had all of them applied to read their file, one would expect about 5.25 million applications,⁸ relative to the 2.17 million applications made as of 2020 (of which about 408,000 came from West Germany). This back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that more people have not accessed their file than have accessed it.

Deliberate ignorance is not the only reason not to read one’s file, but it plays an important role. Indeed, several public figures clearly stated that they did not want to know what was in their file, including Nobel Laureate Günter Grass (Schlüter, 2012), former West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, and Claus Weselsky, a prominent trade union leader who grew up in the GDR (see Ellerbrock & Hertwig, 2021). Yet their decision stands in stark contrast with the view taken by the BStU.

2. The institutional norm: Viewing the file

Joachim Gauck, the first head of the BStU, identified the Stasi as “the prime instrument of oppression” in East Germany (Gauck & Fry, 1994, p. 278), and argued that “every citizen who was a victim of the illegal regime should have the right to see his or her file” (in Schumacher, 2017).

Marianne Birthler, his successor, struck a similar chord (Birthler,

⁵ This decision was fiercely contested. Although many East German civil rights activists advocated for opening the files, various prominent West German politicians spoke out against it (see Ellerbrock & Hertwig, 2021).

⁶ This does not mean that no file was created. It only indicates that no file could be linked to the applicant. Reasons for this vary greatly: the applicant was never monitored and no file was created; the applicant’s file was destroyed; or the applicant’s file was shredded and is under reconstruction.

⁷ One frequently quoted reason is the desire to come to terms with one’s personal history; another is entering a new stage in life, such as retirement (see, e.g., reports 9–12).

⁸ This number converges with the size of the Klarnamenkartei F16, one of the Stasi’s two most important reference systems, which includes about 5.6 million index cards of people mentioned in the files (Der Bundesbeauftragte, 2021, p. 25). Note that the Stasi kept files on their informants and their regular employees, as well as on suspected opponents of the regime.

2009, own translation; see also [Birthler, 2003](#)), arguing that:

Without the opening of the Stasi files our lives, indeed, our country, would be different today. ... Above all, countless people would not have had the chance to view their documents, to use them to reconstruct their fate, and to once again be masters of their own story.

According to these official voices, by viewing their file, people could reclaim the life that had been stolen from them—realising, for instance, that they had been prevented from travelling, attending university, or pursuing a particular career path as part of the Stasi's psychological warfare. Given that individuals potentially had so much to gain from accessing their files, why does deliberate ignorance seem to be the approach of choice for so many people?

3. The reasons behind deliberate ignorance

[Hertwig and Engel \(2016, 2020\)](#) have distinguished a wide range of reasons that explain why people choose not to know (see also [Sharot & Sunstein, 2020](#); [Sunstein, 2020](#)). They include the desire to avoid anticipated unpleasant emotions (e.g., fear of a life-threatening medical diagnosis, regret about an underperforming investment, disappointment over an act of betrayal), to achieve strategic aims (e.g., eschewing responsibility and avoiding liability), and to maintain impartiality and fairness (see Fig. 1 in [Hertwig & Engel, 2016](#)). Here, we explore three questions: First, what reasons do people invoke for choosing not to access their Stasi file? Second, how common are these reasons and how are they interrelated? Third, how do those reasons play out in the context of individual lives? In so doing, we aim to gain insights into the reasons for and the functions and contexts of deliberate ignorance and to take a first step toward a better understanding of how individual decisions contribute to shaping a society's memory culture.

4. The present study

To examine the reasons people invoke for remaining ignorant about the contents of their Stasi file, we took a cross-disciplinary approach, combining two methodologies widely used to probe people's reasons and preferences—one in psychology and the behavioural sciences, the other in the social sciences and humanities: survey methods for a quantitative analysis (Part A in the Online Supplement) and life history interviews for a qualitative analysis (Part B in the Online Supplement), respectively. We administered a short survey to a sample of GDR citizens ($N = 134$) who had volunteered to be interviewed about why they did not want to read their files. The survey presented 15 reasons for not reading the files (see Methods) and assessed several potential covariables (e.g., SED membership). The reasons and contexts (see Online Supplement, Part A) were identified through an iterative process of reviewing the literature on, for example, collective and individual memory of difficult pasts (e.g., [Welzer, Moller, & Tschuggnall, 2002](#)), emotion regulation (e.g., [Gross, 2007](#)), and deliberate ignorance (e.g., [Gigerenzer & Garcia-Retamero, 2017](#)); consulting public sources (e.g., the motives and experiences of public figures such as Günter Grass, Claus Weselsky, and author Christa Wolf; see [Ellerbrock & Hertwig, 2021](#)); and conducting interviews. This process is described in detail in the Methods section. In parallel, we conducted a semistructured interview with a second sample of volunteers ($N = 22$). This interview combined elements of life history and thematic interviews with the goal of contextualising individuals' reasons for not viewing their file. It covers both memories and current reflections. This qualitative approach is a "powerful tool for discovering, exploring and evaluating the nature of the historical memory—how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them" ([Frisch, 1990](#), p. 188). Our investigation thus combines behavioural and historiographical methodologies to

understand individual decisions to remain deliberately ignorant against a background of social transformation. Cross-disciplinary cooperation between psychologists and historians or sociologists is rare (see [Welzer et al., 2002](#); [Wierling, 2013](#)), but we found this innovative approach to be a fitting way of addressing our research questions.

5. Method

5.1. Procedure

We used a combination of survey and interview methods to study GDR citizens' decision not to view their Stasi file (or, more technically, not to submit an application to the BSTU). This approach combined quantitative and qualitative analyses, with the survey gauging the reasons' prevalence (see Part A of the Online Supplement) and the interviews (see Part B of the Online Supplement for the interview guide) providing additional context.

The study instruments were developed in an iterative process. First, we collated an initial set of six reasons from prominent figures' public statements about not viewing their Stasi file (see [Ellerbrock & Hertwig, 2021](#), pp. 32 ff.).⁹ These were (i) facilitating cohesion and cooperation (e.g., the need to continue working with colleagues who had collaborated with the Stasi); (ii) protecting oneself from shame (e.g., being reminded of behaviour that now seems shameful or humiliating); (iii) protecting oneself from betrayal and regret (e.g., discovering informants in the family); (iv) preserving one's sense of self (e.g., by avoiding painful questions about one's identity then and now); (v) resisting the claim to truth (e.g., challenging the idea that the file contains objective truth); and (vi) resisting hypocritical norms (e.g., rejecting the authority of the new system to control access to the files). Second, in November 2016, in cooperation with the Deutsches Hygiene Museum Dresden, a forum for exchange on cultural, social, and scientific matters, we held an event in which we discussed the reasons people decide not to view their Stasi file and then opened the dialogue up to the audience. The goal of this event was to gather as many reasons as possible from the audience. Each attendee could also anonymously submit reasons in writing. This input extended our initial set of reasons from six to twelve. Third, we drafted a set of questions for semistructured interviews. We designed this interview guide according to the principles of oral history interviews, integrating aspects of thematic and life history interviews—the former to elicit the reasons people chose not to view their file; the latter to situate these reasons (and how they may have changed across time) within the respondent's life. The interview consisted of a biographical section covering three periods of time—life in the GDR, the Peaceful Revolution, and postreunification—and a set of open questions to elicit the key reasons respondents chose not to view their Stasi file.

Fourth, we conducted five pilot interviews. On this basis, we identified three further reasons for not viewing one's Stasi file and adapted the interview structure such that the interviewer could guide the interviewee without unduly restricting or priming them. We ended this iterative process after five interviews because no new reasons appeared to emerge ([Charmaz, 2014](#); [Corbin & Strauss, 2014](#)). Fifth, we constructed the final set of 15 survey questions to assess each of the reasons compiled (see Part A of the Online Supplement).

⁹ To this end, we systematically searched the public record with the help of the scientific library of the Max Planck Institute of Human Development. Using a range of key words as well as key phrase identifiers, the search aimed to identify testimonials about people's attitudes toward their Stasi files. The search covered literature databases in history, psychology, sociology, and the social sciences, interdisciplinary literature databases, library catalogues, and newspaper databases.

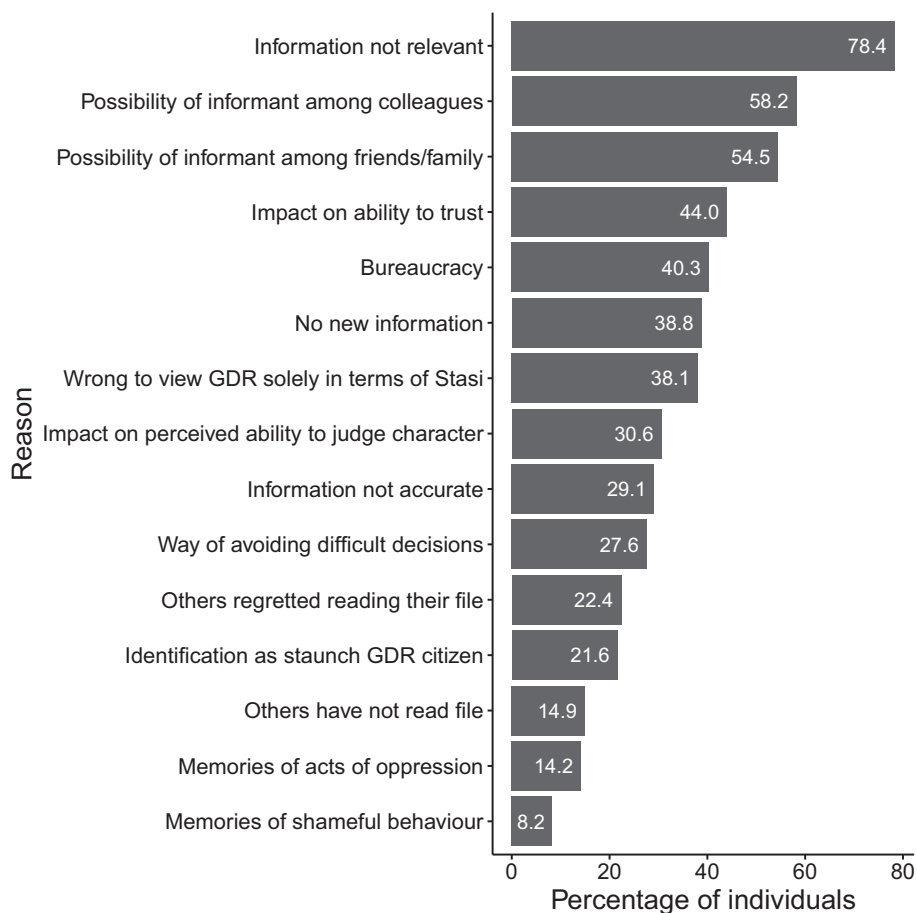


Fig. 1. Fifteen reasons for not viewing one's Stasi file in order of prevalence in the survey study (multiple responses were allowed).

5.2. Interviewees

The next step was to recruit GDR citizens who were willing to be interviewed about their choice not to view their file. To this end, and in parallel to the museum event, we gave several radio and newspaper interviews that showcased the research topic and invited potential interviewees to get in touch. Conditions for inclusion in the pool of prospective interviewees were that they thought a Stasi file had been kept on them and that they had not submitted an application to the BStU to access it. From the 161 people who contacted us, we selected five respondents for the pilot interviews and 22 respondents (7 women, 15 men) for the semistructured interviews. In making this selection, we sought to include a diverse range of professional backgrounds (e.g., teacher, pastor, Stasi officer, SED functionary, homemaker) as well as to ensure variety in terms of gender and age. The 22 semistructured interviews, on average, lasted 118 min, ranging between 42 and 205 min. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, resulting in almost 1000 pages of transcriptions. The ethics committees of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development (Berlin) and of the Technical University Dresden approved the semistructured interview study.

The remaining 134 respondents (64 women, 70 men) were presented with the survey questions. All were at least 47 years old (median age 65 years); Fig. S3 in the Online Supplement plots the age distribution of participants. We commissioned an international market research institute (Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung, GfK) to conduct a computer-assisted personal interview in participants' homes (starting in November 2017). Interviewees entered their answers directly into a laptop using an electronic pen. The ethics committee of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development (Berlin) approved the survey study. Data collection, processing, and storage were in full accordance with

German data protection regulations.

The interview and survey data are not available due to confidentiality issues. Given the nature and scope of the interviews and survey responses (including sensitive personal data), it is impossible to guarantee anonymity; participants therefore requested that access to their sensitive responses be restricted. The authors are currently exploring ways to archive the interviews and survey responses and make them accessible to other researchers.

6. Results

6.1. Survey results

Fig. 1 shows the proportion of people who selected each of the 15 reasons presented in the survey. The median number of reasons cited per person was 5.2. People tended to select more than one reason because some are conceptually related. For instance, a respondent who worries that friends and family may have worked as informants for the Stasi may also worry about being confronted with decisions they would prefer to avoid. We therefore also report the full set of Pearson correlations among reasons (see Fig. S1 in Part C of the Online Supplement).

The most selected reason (78.4%) was that the information in the files was no longer of **relevance** to the respondent's life today. We return to this result when reporting the interview findings. The next most prevalent reasons all pertained to **social relationships**: concerns that colleagues (58.2%) or friends or family members (54.5%) had worked as informants, and worries about negative impacts on respondents' ability to trust others (44.0%). The concern that a colleague had worked as an informant was correlated with the concern that a friend or family member had done so ($r = 0.44$; see Fig. S1). The concern about friends or

family also correlated with concerns about being able to trust others ($r = 0.48$) and feeling able to accurately judge character ($r = 0.38$), as well as with a reason not directly subsumed under the category of relationships, namely, being confronted with decisions they would prefer to avoid (27.6%, $r = 0.33$). The same did not apply to concerns about colleagues.

The **bureaucracy** involved in applying to view one's file was invoked by 40.3% of respondents. Others questioned the **utility and credibility of the information** contained in the files: Nearly two out of five respondents (38.8%) believed that they already knew what was in their file, and almost a third (29.1%) doubted the accuracy of the information contained.

Political convictions and discontent with the institutional memory policy also contributed to respondents' unwillingness to view their file: 38.1% felt that it was wrong to view the GDR solely in terms of the Stasi. Another 21.6% did not read their file because they identified as staunch citizens of the GDR. These two reasons were also substantially correlated ($r = 0.37$; Fig. S1).¹⁰

For some, the choice not to read their file was informed by **others' experiences and behaviours**: 22.4% abstained from viewing their file because they knew people who regretted having done so and 14.9% because most people around them had not read their file either.

Finally, some respondents did not want to revive painful **memories**: 14.2% feared that it would remind them of experiences of oppression in the GDR and 8.2% that viewing their file would remind them of their own shameful behaviour.

6.2. Interview results

The survey results revealed a diverse set of reasons for not reading one's Stasi files. We now contextualise some of the key reasons by drawing on our semistructured interviews—whereas the survey results provide an overview of people's reasons, the interviews add background, layers of meaning, and a first-person perspective. Below we outline the insights we gained from analysing interviews with a separate sample of 22 respondents. Translations of the interview extracts on which the following is based are provided in Part D of the Online Supplement.¹¹ We do not claim that our selection of voices is representative of the group of people who decided not to view their file; rather, we see these interviews and the samples included here as located in the "context of discovery" (Reichenbach, 1938; Richardson, 2006). This approach makes it possible to formulate hypotheses about generalisable reasons for and functions of deliberate ignorance among citizens of transformational societies. Our goal is not to test or discern between models of deliberate ignorance (see Brown & Walasek, 2021; Trimmer et al., 2020), but rather to better understand the individual choice not to know in a transformative society.

6.2.1. Relevance

In the survey data, lack of relevance emerged as the most prevalent reason not to view one's file. Yet of the 105 people who said that they had not accessed their file because the information was not relevant,

¹⁰ Of the 134 respondents, 44 (33%) reported having been members of the SED. Among this group, 43.2% cited their staunch citizenship of the GDR as a reason not to read their file, whereas only about 11.1% of nonmembers cited this reason. Half of the SED members (50.0%) disagreed with reducing the GDR to the activities of the Stasi, relative to nearly a third of nonmembers (32.2%). In general, however, SED party members did not invoke drastically different reasons than nonparty members (see Figure S2 in the Online Supplement for a full summary of results). For instance, almost the same proportions of party and nonparty members were concerned about finding out that their colleagues had been informants (56.8% and 58.9%, respectively).

¹¹ For the sake of brevity, we focus here on just a few selected interview extracts from nearly 1000 pages of transcriptions. The full material will be analysed in more detail in a planned book.

only a single person cited lack of relevance as the only reason. The large majority (90.4%) endorsed at least two further reasons. For instance, 73 (69.5%) also cited the possibility that someone close to them (family, friends, or colleagues) had worked for the Stasi as a reason for not viewing their file.

Interviewee A uses the words "relevance" or "relevant" a total of 21 times. His litmus test for relevance is the potential consequences of knowing who acted as an informant. He concludes that the information in the file has no relevance for him insofar as this knowledge about informants cannot "change the past." At the same time, it can come at a great cost: The knowledge "can haunt you for a lifetime" and "destroy friendships." He also thinks that appearing in the file as a Stasi informant is "worse than murder."

Interviewee B, a pastor,¹² on the one hand says that the information in his file would not change anything—in that sense, it is irrelevant. On the other hand, he talks about the anger he would feel toward whoever informed on him—and about the hurt a confrontation might cause that person. He describes the unknown informant as themselves a victim, likely coerced by the Stasi. Seeing only negative consequences for all parties, he frames viewing the file not as an emancipatory act, but as an act of self-indulgence and licking old wounds.

These interviewees and others concluded that the information contained in the Stasi files lacked relevance because the past cannot be changed. Yet their emotional and detailed testimony suggests that the anticipated content of the file was anything but irrelevant and could have serious psychological or emotional repercussions—for the interviewees themselves and for others.

6.2.2. Social relationships

The next set of reasons cited for not viewing one's Stasi files all pertained to relationships—specifically, whether colleagues or friends and family had worked as informants, and the anticipated impact on respondents' perceived ability to trust others or judge character—and reflect a motivation to shield important relationships from difficult knowledge and potentially painful decisions (Simmel, 2013).

Interviewee C suspects that her sister, with whom she has had a strained relationship for many years, was an informant. She fears that such a discovery would cause major discord in her family.

Interviewee D notes he would be disappointed if somebody from his close environment had been an informant. Not viewing the file is his way of shielding himself from this information and its emotional consequences, particularly in terms of the trust he placed in his closest friends.

Interviewee E is worried that she would find out that the father of her younger daughter was an informant. To her, this would constitute final, painful proof that "yes, he was an asshole" and cast doubt on her ability to judge character: "Oh God, you were totally wrong about that person." She prefers to grant him and anybody else she suspected of being an informant the benefit of the doubt.

Interviewee F offers insights from the perspective of a former Stasi officer who actively opened and curated files. He reasons that intelligence services need to protect themselves and accepts that the Stasi monitored him as well: "it went without saying that [...] my phone could also be tapped at any time." Knowing how the Stasi worked, he asks why he should look at his file, only to be annoyed by something his sister might have said or the wording chosen by a fellow Stasi officer. To that extent, even this former Stasi officer is consciously engaged in a kind of emotion regulation.

Interviewee G, a former teacher educator and SED member, suspects that colleagues in her faculty were "keeping an eye on" her. She fears that the informant was somebody she knew well; were her fears confirmed, her opinion of that person would plummet. This moral condemnation is striking given that she also deems state surveillance to

¹² We reveal biographical information only when it sheds additional light on the reasons and motives given.

be “normal.” In her view, all countries monitor their citizens and the GDR was no different.

All of these choices regarding social relationships illustrate the use of deliberate ignorance as an emotion regulation strategy (Hertwig & Engel, 2016) aimed at avoiding regret, disappointment, and anger, as well as the potentially painful implications of the knowledge gained (e.g., having to confront friends or family members who betrayed one’s trust, inability to trust others in the future). It is also notable that many interviewees (e.g., Interviewee C, who fears that her sister was an informant) appear to have never considered the possibility that viewing their file might prove their suspicions unfounded.

6.2.3. Bureaucracy

Interviewee H mentions some of the bureaucratic hurdles he would need to overcome to access his file and concludes that “the whole bureaucratic act, it was too much for me.” He describes how he filled out the application forms more than once, but could not summon the motivation to submit them. Yet almost in the same breath, he gives a very different reason for not accessing his files: “I don’t want to be disappointed. I don’t want to read what I already know. Meaning who betrayed me.” The likely suspect is his former partner. Thus, while bureaucracy is a valid reason for not accessing one’s file, citing it may also serve as a convenient way to mask other reasons.

6.2.4. Utility and credibility of the information

Interviewee I, a diplomat who worked in GDR foreign embassies and lost his job after reunification, states that he has a pretty good idea what to expect in his file. The Stasi interviewed him when he was a student because they were interested in his contacts with students from countries that were potential GDR trading partners. He also assumes that the Stasi viewed the reports he wrote for the Ministry for State Security. He sees no reason to expect to find anything new in his file.

Interviewee E states that she could not take the information in her file at face value, reasoning that informants may have been under such pressure to deliver that they faked reports: “Why should what’s written there be true? [...] They’re not holy scriptures, damn it, it’s all the work of criminals.” She refuses to “do those people the honour” of according any value to their work.

Interviewee J identifies as a staunch citizen of the GDR, but nevertheless questions the accuracy of the information recorded in the files. He describes the Stasi’s collection of data as psychopathic, as a cancerous tumour—an organism that developed a life of its own and proliferated out of control. He believes that alarmist reports were written to justify the need for the system of surveillance.

6.2.5. A symbolic act of political opposition

Roland Jahn, the most recent head of the BStU, has described accessing one’s Stasi files as an important act of liberation:

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. (Finger, 2012, own translation).

Jahn was persecuted in the GDR and opposed its intrusions into the lives of its citizens. However, there are also GDR citizens who disapproved of reunification. For them, not viewing their file was as much a symbolic political act as viewing the file was for Jahn.

Interviewee J fundamentally rejects the authority of reunified Germany and the BStU to control access to the files—an offer that in his view is not theirs to give. It is his file, and he refuses to “ask permission” or “beg” to see it.

Interviewee K describes his decision not to view his file as an “act of

opposition.” For him, it was clear that there needed to be a full examination of the GDR past and that it was wrong to focus solely on the Stasi, which was only one aspect of an entire political system.

Interviewee L, a former SED functionary, states that most informants were coerced into collaborating with the Stasi. He refers to their treatment after reunification as “perverse” and a “witch hunt”; for him, not reading his file is a way of not engaging in this collective shaming of informants.

Interviewee F, the former Stasi officer, describes how the opening of the Stasi files reversed power from the controllers to the controlled—giving people access to their files meant that “they also got power over others.” In his opinion, that was “the biggest crime [...] after the fall of the Wall.” Hardworking people’s lives were destroyed by revelations that they had worked as informants. Ironically, he arrives at the same conclusion as former West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt (see Ellerbrock & Hertwig, 2021), namely, that the best thing would have been if the files had gone up in flames.

6.2.6. Influence of peers

Numerous interviewees referred to the fact that most people they knew chose not to view their file (thus invoking the importance of others’ actions; the “descriptive norm”; Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007). Others knew that friends or family members had been distressed by the content of their file, and not infrequently interviewees observed that they did not discuss the issue of reading the file at all—not even with those closest to them.

Interviewee M knew people who had read their file and were “appalled”; their “world collapsed” under the knowledge that people close to them had spied on them. This reinforced her choice not to view her file.

Interviewee I, the diplomat, says he has never talked to anybody about whether to read one’s files. Were his brother still alive, he thinks they might have discussed it.

Interviewee G reports that her friends and acquaintances never talked about their Stasi files. When her daughter mentioned that she had read her own file, the interviewee did not pursue the matter further—even though she had good reason to expect that it included information on her: Interviewee G and her husband had been instructed to break off contact with her daughter when she started dating someone from a nonsocialist country.

Interviewee N says nobody from her family wanted to read their file and that the issue is “suppressed” in the Left Party circles in which she now moves. In contrast, the Christian civil rights activists she used to spend time with weighed up the pros and cons carefully. She also knows people who were imprisoned by the Stasi and “went mad”; one person had all his teeth extracted because he thought they had been bugged. She thinks it “didn’t help that he knew who spied on him.”

7. Discussion

Individuals and societies live within political and historical contexts, and individual and collective memories evolve in tandem. Political priorities inform both the collective and individual processes of “selection and exclusion, neatly separating useful from not useful, and relevant from irrelevant memories” (Assmann, 2006, p. 216). While individual memory and public memory culture may influence each other, their underlying motives, reasons, and priorities may diverge. This congruence or lack thereof can modulate the pace of societal change (Ellerbrock & Hertwig, 2021). And yet there has been little investigation of deliberate ignorance on an individual level in periods of societal transformation. The opening of the Stasi files offers a unique opportunity to explore how citizens of a collapsed state make sense of their choice not to look into the past.

Combining a survey and in-depth interviews, we arrived at seven major findings. First, many East Germans, perhaps even the majority, appear not to share the sentiment that a Stasi file is “a gift to memory ...

[f]ar better than a madeleine” (Garton Ash, 1997, p. 12). Second, the reasons behind deliberate ignorance are diverse, including regulation of negative emotions (e.g., regret, moral outrage, and disappointment), social concerns (e.g., avoiding conflict in the family and at work), epistemic issues (e.g., to what extent the information contained in the files can be taken as true), and political symbolism (e.g., rejecting the new system’s authority). Third, individuals’ predominant social concerns echo the priorities of deliberate ignorance in collective memory politics, except that at the individual level goals such as peace, cohesion, cooperation, and harmony relate to family and friends or colleagues and not to larger collectives. Fourth, these social concerns seem to outweigh justice concerns such as transparency, accountability, punishment, apology, and repentance, which were not mentioned at all in the interviews. Fifth, the methodological combination of a survey and in-depth interviews flanked by quantitative and qualitative analysis allowed us to delve deeper into the contexts that inform people’s reasons not to know and thus to identify and clarify major discrepancies between the individual and collective levels that, left uncovered, would have been profoundly puzzling. For instance, the collective remembrance model is premised on the belief that knowledge is always relevant: Although it cannot change the past, it is instrumental in shaping a better society in the present and future. Yet survey respondents often endorsed lack of relevance as a reason for not gaining knowledge. It was only through the interviews that it became clear that individuals’ interpretation of relevance differed from the collective view, in that it was focused solely on the past: Knowing what was in the files would not change what had happened. What’s more, interviewees’ claims of irrelevance actually masked concerns about profound negative effects on the future. Sixth, the interviews shed light on the potential role of experiences of oppression. Many GDR citizens—especially those targeted by the Stasi—suffered greatly under the regime (Neuendorf, 2017). Others felt loyal to the GDR and its socialist ideology. Although some of our interviewees experienced significant interference in their lives (e.g., not being permitted to go to university or to emigrate), none said that they had suffered severe oppression (e.g., physical abuse, imprisonment, medical interventions). This suggests that the experience of severe abuse and violence may separate those who feel compelled to read their file from those who do not; it may trigger the desire to find out who was responsible for one’s suffering and potentially seek redress or offer forgiveness. Furthermore, as the heads of the BStU emphasised, it may help in regaining self-determination. Seventh and finally, some interviewees who described themselves as loyal citizens of the GDR normalised the unparalleled level of control and surveillance as a necessary evil akin to the activities of other countries’ intelligence agencies. For this group of citizens, not reading one’s file appears to be as much a political and symbolic act as it is for those who read their file in order to reclaim their past.

7.1. How interview data can enrich research on decision processes

As our approach demonstrates, incorporating life history interviews into the psychological research repertoire could open new doors for behavioural science. After reading an earlier version of this article, Robin Hogarth (personal communication, Sept. 3rd, 2021), an elder statesman in the field of behavioural decision research, commented:

Why don’t we do more with interviews? [...] If [in our field of research] interviews were more and better explored, what would change in the conduct of decision research? A move away from a priori economic models? Perhaps we should use interview techniques in more studies? The complexity of different arguments used by respondents was amazing to me and suggested that we typically overlook how people have multiple goals even when they begin to think about decisions.

What do the interviews tell us about the decision process? One key observation relates to the atemporality of decisions entailed in classic

rational models of choice. Models such as expected utility theory assume that decision makers are able to anticipate all future consequences of their actions, thus leaving “no room in the scheme for ‘unanticipated consequences’” (Simon, 1955, p. 103). Once a decision is made, there is no need to ever revise it. Yet the interviews include several examples of people wavering, reconsidering, and reevaluating (see Interviewees H and K in the Online Supplement for examples). Individuals’ choice to select and exclude information is thus not cast in stone but is subject to change. For instance, 80-year-old Interviewee K revisited his long-standing decision to not access his file after hearing a contemporary describe her own experience. Classical models of choice assume that values and preferences are stable, but reality is different—decisions and reasons can be revisited as new experiences are made and circumstances change.

We observed a further discrepancy between our findings and classical models of choice. Numerous theories of human choice behaviour—including expected value theory, expected utility theory, prospect theory, Benjamin Franklin’s moral algebra, and moral theories such as utilitarianism and consequentialism—assume that people deal with conflicts by weighing up all of their options, the respective pros and cons, and the anticipated consequences, and then making trade-offs (see Brandstätter, Gigerenzer, & Hertwig, 2006). The interviews revealed little, if any, evidence of such trade-offs. One reason for this may be that interviewees anticipated painful discoveries in the files, such as having been betrayed by a loved one. Although standard models of optimisation assume that there is a common currency onto which all outcomes can be mapped (e.g., quantitative probabilities and utilities¹³), some things have no price tag (Elster, 1979). The heartbreak of betrayal may be among the considerations that transcend any common currency and direct a person’s choice (see Tetlock, 2003).

The interviews also demonstrate that beliefs and information have a psychological value (utility) that goes beyond their instrumental value. The standard assumption in economics is that utility relates to tangible outcomes such as money, goods, or health, and not to beliefs (see Brown & Walasek, 2021). From this perspective, information has instrumental value as it can be used to predict outcomes but otherwise it has no utility or disutility; people therefore should not refuse free information—after all, if it turns to be irrelevant, it can simply be ignored. On this account—that of belief-independent utility models (see Brown & Walasek, 2021)—deliberate ignorance will never increase utility. Yet the interviews provide ample evidence that beliefs can carry enormous psychological value (utility). Being able to cling to the belief that one’s trust in family and friends is not misplaced matters enormously. And the notion that people can simply choose to ignore information to the contrary is, at best, psychologically unrealistic.

Another observation was that people focused almost exclusively on the prospect of losses, failing to consider the prospect of gains. Some interviewees feared that their suspicions about who had spied on them would be confirmed, but none entertained the possibility that their file might exonerate the suspect. Whereas in the classic confirmation bias, people actively seek and interpret evidence in ways that support their existing beliefs (Nickerson, 1998), here it is the choice to not seek information that perpetuates an existing belief while protecting people from the pain of having that belief confirmed. One interpretation of such acts of deliberate ignorance that focus on losses is that people are minimising the maximum anticipated regret (Gigerenzer & Garcia-Retamero, 2017). On this view, having one’s worst fears about a loved one confirmed appears to be associated with maximum regret.

In sum, we found little evidence that people’s decision processes can be best captured by classical rational choice models. Rather, the processes appear to be better captured in terms of what Shafir, Simonson,

¹³ Indeed, in the nearly 1000 pages of transcription, we did not find a single instance of a person invoking a quantitative probability (e.g., the likelihood that a particular expectation will be confirmed).

and Tversky (1993) described as “reason-based choice,” that is, the deliberation of reasons for and against accessing the file. Furthermore, people’s decisions seem to have been guided by the desire to minimise anticipated regret (Gigerenzer & Garcia-Retamero, 2017). Some of the deviations between how people make decisions and how they ought to make decisions according to classic decision theory have to do with the bounded nature of human knowledge, memory, computational powers, and time. But to blame all deviations on human boundedness misses two other important points. How can people’s preferences be stable given that the future is inherently uncertain? For instance, somebody adamantly against reading their Stasi file might change their mind following the untimely death of a relative they suspected of having informed on them. Moreover, as discussed above, the notion of belief-independent utility may be a convenient assumption in standard economics, but it is entirely detached from the reality of human psychology.

7.2. Potential objections

Let us consider three potential objections to our findings. First, people may not be aware of their ‘true’ motivations—their stated reasons may therefore not accurately reflect the motives behind their behaviour. Note that this argument is different from that of Nisbett and Wilson (1977; but see also Berger, Dennehy, Bargh, and Morsella, 2016; Ericsson and Simon 1980), who held that people’s ability to introspect about the nature of cognitive processing (e.g., processing speed, objects and inclinations toward them) is limited. We indeed took people as *prima facie* authorities on their motivations for not reading their file. Granted, their reasons are constructed—filtered through present circumstances and memories of the past. From the interviews, however, it became clear that those expressed reasons have great psychological significance: Even if the stated reasons were different from the true ‘hidden’ ones, they are the reasons that inform the stories people tell about themselves, both privately and publicly. In addition, the interviews shed light on instances of seeming contradictions between purported reasons and other substantive reasons (Wierling, 2013)—for instance, when people attributed not reading their file to a lack of relevance, while at the same time cataloguing the enormous personal costs that the information contained may have.

A second potential objection is that this investigation of deliberate ignorance in a period of societal transformation lacks a control condition. Systematic comparisons of historical periods with and without transformation are impossible given the myriad confounding factors. Acknowledging this impossibility, we expect that even in times of relative societal stability, people may have plenty of reasons to practice deliberate ignorance—for example, by avoiding the news. In a recent analysis of media consumers across five countries (Argentina, Finland, Israel, Japan, USA), Villi et al. (2022) found both cognitive and emotional drivers of news avoidance. Emotional drivers “act as a form of self-preservation in an attempt to prevent, or at least curtail, the negative sentiments associated with news items” (p. 156). In some cases, people are so intent on avoiding these emotions that they ignore the news altogether. This suggests that people deliberately choose to not seek information even when they are not directly involved in a period of societal transformation.¹⁴ However, we chose to examine a transitional society because in this context the question of what (not) to know about the past is inevitable, both for the individual and society.

¹⁴ In fact, deliberate ignorance has already been studied in numerous contexts beyond societal transformation and found to be anything but the rare exception to the rule (for a review, see Hertwig & Engel, 2016). Take, for instance, individuals at risk of Huntington’s disease. Almost everybody with the Huntington’s gene will eventually develop the neurodegenerative disorder. Yet no more than 25% of those at high risk opt to test for the gene (see references in Hertwig & Engel). Likewise, one study found that up to 55% of people who get tested for HIV do not return to learn their result (Hightow et al., 2003).

A final potential objection to our investigation rests on how we interpret acquisition costs. Hertwig and Engel (2016) specified the conditions for deliberate ignorance as follows: “the marginal acquisition costs are negligible and the potential benefits potentially large” (p. 360). Are the costs of accessing a Stasi file too high to qualify as negligible? After all, about two-fifths of respondents identified bureaucratic hurdles as a reason for not accessing their files (see Johnson et al., 2012, for a discussion on hurdles and inertia). Yet the current application process is arguably simpler than applying for a passport and can be done by mail, digitally, or in person. Relative to the potential value of the information, the acquisition costs do not appear excessive. We acknowledge that for some respondents even finding out about how to procure this form may feel too burdensome. However, it is important to keep in mind that bureaucratic hurdles are typically invoked in combination with other reasons. Interviewee H, for instance, filled out the form several times but could not bring himself to send it off. The real problem was not bureaucracy, but rather the possibility of having his worst fears confirmed, namely, that his partner had betrayed him.

To conclude, deliberate ignorance can be an adaptive tool for managing emotional threats and maintaining social relations, in transformative settings and beyond. Learning about others’ wrongdoings can tear families and friends apart and undermine people’s ability to trust at a moment when they may already feel extremely insecure (e.g., after the fall of the Wall) and even more dependent on a close-knit social network. Deliberate ignorance can help to control the potentially detrimental effects of this kind of knowledge (see Turnwald et al., 2019). It can also be used to preserve a positive self-image and to dodge difficult personal truths. Yet truth and knowledge are essential to redress sins of the past. From the perspective of fairness in transformational societies, deliberate ignorance can thus seem maladaptive. Our analysis shows that without understanding the goals and values (e.g., prioritising cooperation over justice) that people invoke, it is difficult to evaluate the complex ethical and normative quality of individual decisions to know or not know. Many people have chosen not to read their Stasi file for psychologically valid and often ethically defensible reasons. Deliberate ignorance seems to be a common behavioural strategy, especially in times of crisis and transformation—be they health crises, technological changes, or political upheavals. Time to know more about it.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ralph Hertwig: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Dagmar Ellerbrock:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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