

Spy files back under lock and key

BERLIN: East Germany's secret police archives, forced open a decade ago by hunger-striking protests, have slammed shut, ending a post-Cold War era of openness and possibly protecting those who suppressed a nation for 40 years.

The meticulous note-taking of the East German secret police, or Stasi, has provided historians and journalists with an invaluable insight into the workings of a dictatorship that spent US\$1.6 billion a year securing its stranglehold.

The archives have been instrumental in trying the leaders of feared police operations, ending the careers of politicians tainted with the Stasi brush and breaking up friendships and marriages as former East German citizens discovered their trusted allies or spouses had informed on them.

Many of the 2.4 million people tracked by the Stasi, most just normal former East German citizens, have had access to their own files. The Gauck agency which oversees the archives has also allowed historians and journalists to peer into the records of so-called "prominent" people of historical interest.

That open policy may be coming to an end after former Chancellor Helmut Kohl won a court case to prevent Gauck releasing parts of his 6,000-page dossier.

The decision was based on the view that the 72-year-old Kohl, whose telephones were tapped, was a victim of the Stasi regime, and was legally entitled to withhold his file.

"It's a real setback. Many documents are now simply not available... We reckon that about 90 per cent of inquiries from researchers and the media will be affected. The documents have been rendered unusable," said Marianne Birtler, head of the archives.

Historians worried

People will still be able to view their own files, but researchers will now need permission to view the files of others which might be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. The ruling could also shield the guilty.

The Stasi tailed and tracked



SECRET ARCHIVE: Herbert Ziehm, an employee of the archives of the former East German Ministry For Security or "Stasi", looks into files inside the headquarters in Berlin in this September 24, 1999, file photo. The Gauck agency, which oversees the archives of the former Stasi secret police, says access to historians and journalists may now be closed after former Chancellor Helmut Kohl won a court case to prevent the release of his 6,000 page dossier.

political opponents, both actual and perceived, Western politicians and many of East Germany's 16 million citizens. The archive's papers, if lined up flat, would stretch for 180 kilometres.

The Stasi's job was to prop up a government with a siege-like mentality built on Cold War paranoia which preached equality, but dealt out favours and privileges.

Bernd Schaefer, research fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington who has studied links between the Stasi and the Catholic Church, fears that many files, now with most names blackened out, would lose all meaning.

Plans to fight ruling

In mid-March, Czech President Vaclav Havel signed a law to broaden public access to its files before the former government collapsed.

The Gauck agency, which receives 10,000 new requests a month, says it has been forced to pull down the shutters. For now, it will not release new files except to people seeking their own details and its website is closed as it checks to see if it is compliant with the new ruling.

Birtler said they would try

to get the ruling overturned but did not believe parliament would act in the near future.

"It's not a good time for consensus politics with the election approaching. We have supporters in almost every party but you can imagine that the Christian Democrats will not be in favour of change, out of sympathy with the decision on Kohl," she said.

Germany has given researchers access to the unique file of public figures such as former chancellors Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt. But personal details gleaned from the file, including sexual dalliances, were not made public.

Indeed, Gauck agency lawyer Carl-Stephan Schweer has said that of the 2,500 pages the agency wanted to release on Kohl, all but 10 were banal.

Some in the media had believed it would shed further light on Kohl's acceptance of US\$1 million in illegal campaign donations while in office.

"It is important to remember that the documents release would not have shed light on possible donation scandals. The documents released are only meant to show the activities of the Stasi," Birtler said.