

## From the Vault

The Blog of The Wende Museum

### Ministry for State Security (Stasi) smelling jars

Posted on July 23, 2008 by The Wende Museum



During my first week as an intern at the Wende Museum, I was very confused when what seem to me two ordinary jars crossed my desk needing to be cataloged. After inquiring what the significance of the jars were, I was told that they were Stasi smelling jars. While this reply was meant to answer my question and end my inquires as to why these jars were important, it only served to create more questions. I had taken classes on Eastern European Communism but the term “Stasi” had only briefly been mentioned, so when the term came up again with these jars I was lost. But when I was researching these jars, I not only learned their purpose, I learned a great deal about who the Stasi were and what they did.

The Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Ministry for State Security), commonly known as the Stasi, was the official secret police of East Germany. It was widely regarded as one of the most effective and repressive intelligence and secret police agencies in the world. By having my introduction into learning about the Stasi through the lens of researching the smelling jars, I realized how intensive their surveillance was. The smelling jars used odour recognition to keep tabs on potential dissidents. The Stasi often collected the samples surreptitiously – breaking into homes to steal suspects’ underwear, or by wiping down chairs used during interrogations. The samples were then stored in glass jars, each carefully labeled with details of whom the sample came from. The idea that there were jars full of people’s scents as well as detailed records of people’s lives in Stasi buildings was pretty disturbing to me, because it illuminated the vast power Stasi’s and the GDR had over the lives of the East Germans. It is pretty incredible to think that something so innocuous to me, could mean so much.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/euro>  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stas>

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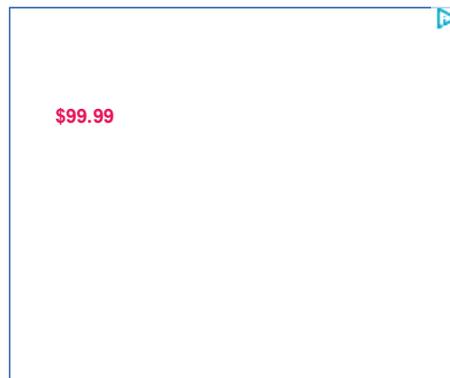
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### 4 Responses to *Ministry for State Security (Stasi) smelling jars*



**YK** says:

July 23, 2008 at 5:55 pm

Super post, Sarah! The jars also make a cameo in The Lives of Others  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Lives\\_of\\_Others](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lives_of_Others) which you and Heather have seen, and everyone else should!

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**jjampol** says:

July 23, 2008 at 6:09 pm

Sarah, this is really insightful and shows how material culture can function not only as a porthole to another world, but also as a catalyst—a clue that inspires further investigation. Thanks for the fascinating posting. Justin

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**Aaron** says:

August 1, 2008 at 5:46 pm

I wonder if any East German freedom fighters realized the power they could accrue simply by not showering. The stasi would either have to throw away precious evidence or risk losing good officers to fits of uncontrolled vomiting.

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**joanne** says:

August 5, 2008 at 5:52 pm

the idea of the Stasi keeping olfactory tabs on individual dissidents is disturbing, to say the least. they've essentially captured a person's "essence"; the word "essence" significantly enough, is derived from the latin "esse" which is the verb "to be" and certainly, a person's scent is perhaps the most visceral and sensually unchanging aspect of a human being. one can neither "used to be" or plan a "will be" different smell, but they're underlying smell is always the same, no matter what perfume/cologne one uses. It is also the most emotional sense, according to various scientific reports (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/05/science/05angier.html?em>)... mightn't this become risky, making a stasi officer (or god forbid a bloodhound) emotional sensitive to a political dissident's smell?? pavlovian backlash?!

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