

Stasiland is a story of courage. To what extent do you agree?

By Beth Illott

The inherent oppressiveness of the Stasi is explored in Anna Funder's Stasiland through an investigation of the impacts on people during the GDR. Although Stasiland explores the courageous acts of people during the GDR regime, it is essentially a story of survival. The victims inability to move on from their past is evident through the impact of Mauer im Kopf, creating a repressive psychological barrier for characters such as Frau Paul and Miriam, restricting their ability to move on from the impact of the GDR. The ex Stasi men, especially Herr Winz, also possess this disabling mentality as they are unable to advance from the 'glory days' and recover from the impact of being involved in the regime. As a repercussion of being involved in the GDR regime, the victims and instigators of the conflict undeniably suffer from Mauer im Kopf, restricting their ability to move on and be survivors of the regime.

Although Frau Paul displays courage in the text, she is unable to mentally survive the impact of the Wall, evidently shown in her suffering from Mauer im Kopf. As a consequence of her psychological damage, Anna reveals that Frau Paul is “a woman holding onto notes on her own life”, and is unable to talk without them. To further portray Frau Paul as a sufferer of the regime, Anna writes that she often “lose[s] [her] track” when talking and is unable to reveal the truth. This may be Frau Paul’s way to deal with her Mauer im Kopf, as she appears “to have forgotten or repressed details” of her past. Anna highlights that “memory...is unreliable. Not only for what it hides and what it alters, but also for what it reveals.” Although Frau Paul denies involvement in smuggling the students to West Germany, it would be inconceivable to imagine she would be unaware of the reasons they came to stay with her. Perhaps her sense of secrecy was apparent as a consequence of the Stasi portraying her as a “criminal” for her involvement. Frau Paul’s courage and resilience in the text is evident from her denial to be “a tame little rat” for the Stasi, refusing to betray Michael, the man involved in East Germany escapes, in exchange for visiting her “critically ill son”, Torsten. Frau Paul remains burdened by this decision, and questions her choice not to see her son, and has undoubtedly suffered for this. Frau Paul is damaged by this courageous decision that traps her in a prison of guilt, restricting her ability to move on with her life as she didn't survive the anguish inflicted upon her during the regime.

Like Frau Paul, Miriam shows courage for being able to share her story with Anna, and although she managed to live a kind of life, she experiences "no peace" from Mauer im Kopf. Miriam bookends Stasiland and her story is the anchor for Anna Funder’s journey to discover life in the GDR. Miriam’s experiences leave her “brave and strong and broken”, yet she “speaks as if her existence is no longer real to her.” As an “enemy of the state at sixteen”, Miriam was victimised and “had her every move anticipated” because of a “crime of sedition” against the GDR. This constant surveillance still impacts Miriam’s life today as she needs “to let things unroll”, as she considers fixed appointments “an unbearable obligation”. Similar to Frau Paul, Miriam is imprisoned by her past, and lives her life as an “epitaph to a life that was”, evident from her refusal to give up searching for answers about Charlie’s death, "for justice”. Mauer im Kopf is further illustrated in Miriam as she believes the GDR regime is “not over yet” and still considers the Stasi as a threat, even though they no longer formally exist. This demonstrates Miriam’s inability to move on from her experiences, and the Mauer im Kopf that she is experiencing causes her to be irreparably damaged in devastating and lasting ways, showing that Miriam was not a survivor of the GDR. Miriam's braveness is shown from her ability to reveal her story to Anna.

Similar to Frau Paul and Miriam, Herr Winz also showed courage by telling his story and he also endured this notion of imprisonment experienced by those involved in the GDR, and did not survive the anguish they experienced. Despite Herr Winz being an instigator of the conflict, he had his identity derogated by the GDR, positioning him as a victim. Herr Winz meets with Anna “to set the record straight”, however “he is disguised as a westerner” and “has hidden his car somewhere so that...I can’t tail him.” This man is playing “spy games seven years after the fall of the Wall”. Although Anna regards this as ridiculous, this demonstrates the impact the GDR has on Herr Winz from constantly being on high alert and wary of other people watching him during the regime, and it was a courageous act in itself to meet with Anna. Herr Winz’s Ostalgie for the former GDR is evident from his outrageous outbreaks in “authoritative barks”, illustrating his belief that “the revolution...is coming” because capitalism can’t survive as it lacks security and safety. Herr Winz is restricted from moving forward and reluctant to share detail about his past, causing him to be stuck in a world of Ostalgie for the regime that was. However, Herr Winz is unable to demolish the Mauer im Kopf due to his past defining who he is, which restricts his ability to be a survivor of the regime, despite his courage to share his story.

Torsten says that "there are no people who are whole". This is portrayed in Stasiland as every character is scarred from their experiences and unable to live their life as it was before the Wall. Funder's text considers the damage the Stasi, its activities and its methods have inflicted upon its victims. Those who suffered are impeded from moving on because they are were unable to mentally survive the regime, evident from the concept of Mauer im Kopf they are enduring. Stasiland acts as a "warning from the past" to diminish the "risk of doing it all again" as the psychological impact has severely affected those involved in the conflict.