An unintended assault on reconciliation

THERE are three groups of people in Germany who discuss the problem of dealing with the past, of finding the truth and of achieving reconciliation: they are the West Germans; those East Germans who actively participated in the peaceful revolution who were persecuted as dissidents and opponents of the former German Demacratic Republic (GDR); and the overwhelming majority of East Germans. Members of this majority feel that they are being put on the spot by the West Germans, that they are being condemned en bloc as fellow-travellers of a dictatorship, and that the West has deprived them of their identity. Consequently, many of them now once again consciously distantiate themselves, as East Germans, from the West.

Against this background, the attempt to establish the truth, and to throw some light upon the machinations of certain individuals during the GDR dictatorship, can easily turn into an unintended assault on the whole process of reconciliation.

Even now, seven years after unification, different perceptions of the responsibility of the media still persist. Very few East Germans share the Western concept of the media as a control organ of civil society. Most East Germans regard investigative journalism as improper, especially when individual politicians are being exposed.

In West Germany the real process of coming to terms with German fascism only started in the '60s. In 1968, the generation of the student revolt was shocked and dismayed to discover how many Nazi criminals had built up successful careers in the Federal Republic. It was the same West German generation which, in 1990, wanted to ensure that the collapse of dictatorship in the GDR would not once again end up in a huge cover-up.

Together with civil rights activists and dissidents in the former GDR, these politically committed West Germans successfully demanded public access to the files of the East German secret service.

The East German bureau for "state security", or Staatssicherheit, Stasi for short, was a state within the state, an organisation aimed at total surveillance of the population. It did so with the aid of "informal collaborators", who were literally everywhere. Stasi computers stored information on more than a quarter of all GDR citizens, in addition to files on more than two million West German citizens.

It is hardly suprising that, after unification, the press was eager to gain access to this wealth of information. It did so by both legal and illegal means. When the GDR collapsed in the autumn of 1989, several Stasi archives were stormed by angry groups of citizens, and a wealth of information was offered for sale on the "grey market".

On the basis of this unofficially obtained material, the West German press made startling revelations in the two stormy years after the collapse of the GDR. For instance, it transpired that almost all leading figures in the newly-established pro-democracy parties in the GDR had either been former Stasi informers, or had been planted.

Consequently, since there were hardly any uncompromised East German politicians to be found, the most influential political posts in the East were filled with West German appointments. What West German journalists regarded as clever investigative journalism often appeared to East Germans as an attempt to discredit their leaders.

Discussions between East and West around guilt or culpability in connection with Stasi involvement are extremely difficult. This became abundantly clear to me as early as 1990, when I was still working on the editorial board of the tageszeitung. The editorial staff of the paper's East German edition had just been integrated with the West German board, when a computer disk listing all the under-cover apartments rented by the Stasi came into our possession.

We were extremely enthusiastic. The list was something of a scoop. Our East German colleagues did not share this enthusiasm at all. We, the West German editorial staff, were totally bewildered. We simply could not understand how anyone could wish to suppress such a vital document. If we had obtained a similar list of under-cover apartments used by the West German secret service, we would have published it without a moment's hesitation.

But our East German colleagues felt that publication would only serve to open old wounds, and would not be constructive. The practical objection was that the appartments might be occupied by new tenants who would now be wrongly suspected of Stasi connections. To counter this, we sent reporters on random investigations of the apartments, most of which turned out to be empty.

This did not change the minds of our East German colleagues, who were eventually outvoted.

Subsequently, all fears relating to publication proved groundless: not a single person was victimised. Nevertheless, the whole debate left the editorial staff deeply divided, and most East German colleagues subsequently left the paper.

A similar debate, but under different circumstances and with different results, played itself out last year at the Wochenpost. Having been published in the former GDR, the Wochenpost continued to attract a mostly East German readership, even after unification.

When a West German daily revealed that one of the best-known East German pop stars, Barbara Thalheim, had collaborated with the Stasi in the 70s, I immediately assumed that the Wochenpost had to cover this issue extensively.

When the editorial staff discussed the matter, my East German colleagues were extremely guarded. It took a couple of days before I learned the reason. One of our reporters, a man of some influence on the editorial board, had been married to Thalheim. Some colleagues felt that the reporter, who did not wish to comment, had possibly known about his ex-wife's involvement for some time.

The editors' passive resistance was so persistent, that in the end the Wochenpost did not publish a single word about the Thalheim affair. This is a great pity. Thalheim is one of the few former Stasi informers who genuinely regret their past actions.

Today, seven years later, it is difficult to decide whether these actions did, in fact, create the conditions for social and national reconciliation.

JURGEN GOTTSCHLICH, one of the founder members of tageszeitung, and an editor-in-chief on Wochenpost in the former East Germany, recently visited South Africa to attend the TRC media hearings, give seminars and talk about the German experience of reconciliation after the Berlin Wall came down.