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Researchers uncover Stasi order to fire on escapees from former East Germany

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BERLIN — The agency that manages the records of former East Germany's dreaded secret police has uncovered an order for border guards to fire on escaping citizens that is far more explicit than others on record, an official said in remarks published Saturday.

Though the official East German border regulations said use of a firearm was to be considered an "extreme measure in the use of force," the Oct. 1, 1973 order to border guards from the Ministry for State Security, or Stasi, is much less reserved, Magdeburg's Volksstimme newspaper reported.

"Do not hesitate with the use of a firearm, including when the border breakouts involve women and children, which the traitors have already frequently taken advantage of," the order instructed.

Before the 1990 reunification of Germany, more than 1,000 people were killed on the eastern side of the highly fortified border as they tried to escape to the West, including more than 125 at the Berlin Wall, which was erected in 1961.

Ronald Pofalla, general secretary of Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative Christian Democrats, said the order to shoot "demonstrates in a horrific way how inhuman this system was."

"On the eve of the anniversary of the construction of the wall, it is a lesson to all of those who want to let the barbarity of the communist regime be consigned to the annals of history," Pofalla said in an interview with Berlin's B-Z newspaper.

The written order from the Stasi was found among the papers of an East German border guard identified only as Sgt. Manfred L., Joerg Stoye, head of the Magedeburg office of the Stasi Records Office, told the Volksstimme newspaper.

Other such orders contained more limitations on the use of force, making its discovery an "exciting and highly important find for the study of the history of the Stasi," Stoye was quoted as saying.

He did not immediately return calls by The Associated Press to his office.

Germany was divided into communist East Germany and democratic West Germany after the end of World War II in 1945.

The Stasi, founded in the 1950s, had 91,000 full-time employees and 180,000 undercover informers. They kept East Germany's population of 18 million under blanket surveillance while the

regime built the Berlin Wall and a border bristling with mines, barbed wire, dogs and self-activating machine guns.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, the border came down, the Stasi was disbanded and East and West Germany were united in 1990.

Hundreds of former East German border guards and officials have since been convicted for border shootings. Most received suspended sentences, although a few former leaders went to jail.

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