

ASPECTS OF CRISIS AND DECLINE OF THE EAST GERMAN FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE IN THE 1980S

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The HV A, the Stasi's foreign espionage department, is said to be one of the most successful intelligence services of the twentieth century. However, this statement is true only in some respects. One very often ignores the fact that Stasi espionage also had its weaknesses and problems, that it had better periods and worse ones. While the HV A experienced dynamic development and enjoyed some success in intelligence-gathering in the 1960s and 1970s, it grew stagnant in the 1980s and exhibited symptoms of crisis and decline throughout East Germany's final decade.

The central thesis of this contribution is that the undifferentiated picture of the HV A as one of the world's most successful intelligence services — frequently drawn by former HV A employees — strongly resembles the “Stab-in-the-Back” legend [*Dolchstoßlegende*] that circulated in Germany after World War I. At that time, General Paul von Hindenburg, the former chief of the Supreme Army Command [*Oberste Heeresleitung*], claimed that the German army had not been defeated militarily in World War I but had lost the war because the home front had failed the army — that is, had stabbed it in the back.

This thesis — that former HV A employees created a kind of “Stab-in-the-Back” legend about their own organization — can be proved by analyzing different documents from the Stasi archive, and by providing statistics from the SIRA database, the “System of Information Research of the HV A” [System der Informations-Recherche der HV A], that was in use in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of these documents and statistics show that, in the 1980s, East Germany's foreign intelligence, like its economy and politics, also underwent a crisis. This contribution will present some of these documents, which will allow a more differentiated view of the development of Stasi espionage. However, they will not tell the whole story — or history — of the HV A. Rather they will concentrate by way of example on one question: How successful was the Stasi in recruiting West Germans as agents (“unofficial collaborators” [*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*], also known as “*West-IM*”)?

Before going into detail, it has to be mentioned that the HV A archive was almost completely destroyed in early 1990. But since the HV A was an integral part of the Stasi, some documents related to it, or of HV A origin, can be found in other parts of the Stasi archive, such as some important talks by HV A officials. Because they are such rare documents, they are very important.

The documents presented below in chronological order originate from middle- and high-ranking Stasi officials and from the governing communist party of the German Democratic Republic, the Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartie, SED). They are mainly presentations in which the speaker takes stock of a certain period of time. They will be followed by a brief analysis of some statistics from the SIRA database.

1962: The SED's Central Committee Harshly Criticizes the Work of East German Foreign Intelligence

The first document dates from spring 1962. It is a report addressed to Stasi minister Erich Mielke, written by the “department for questions of security” of the SED’s Central Committee. This “department for questions of security” had just finished a three-week review within the HV A. It had evaluated the HV A and now wished to inform Mielke of its findings.¹

Three statements in this report are of particular importance. First, it praises the HV A for having changed the system of communication among agents sufficiently early — before the inner German border was closed in August 1961 when the Berlin Wall was erected — to prevent this event from seriously affecting the HV A’s spying activities:

The size of the [agent] network has essentially been maintained since August 13, 1961, and, the mode of communication was already changed in accordance with the security measures of the party and government beforehand.²

This statement is remarkable, because after 1990, former HV A leader Markus Wolf said that the building of the Berlin Wall caught him completely by surprise.³ This report refutes this assertion. Second, this report faults the HV A for running too few agents in West German power and decision centers so that the copious information it procured turned out to have only limited value. Third, the report criticizes the HV A for having professional staff (i.e., officers), who

1 ZK der SED, Abteilung für Sicherheitsfragen: Bericht über den Brigadeinsatz der Abteilung für Sicherheitsfragen in der Hauptabteilung [sic] Aufklärung des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit Berlin, 15.3.1962; BStU, MfS, SdM 1351, pp. 122–38.

2 Ibid., p. 123.

3 For example, see his statement in Markus Wolf, *Letzte Gespräche* (Berlin, 2007), 48–50. Wolf headed the HV A and its predecessors between 1953 and 1986.

were neither controlled nor educated enough. As many professionals proved to be unfit, they had to be removed or fired, resulting in a very high turnover rate. Furthermore, between 1952 and 1962, four HV A professionals defected to the West. One of them was Max Heim, head of a division that spied on the governing West German Christian Democratic Party. His 1959 defection led to the arrest of more than 30 HV A agents in West Germany. The report attacks Markus Wolf personally:

Even the leader of the Hauptverwaltung, Comrade General Major Wolf, restricts his monitoring activity in the main only to individual, important operative procedures and to receiving reports from the division heads. There is insufficient on-the-spot monitoring of particular specialties and entire areas of operation.⁴

Finally, it is important to know that Stasi chief Mielke accepted the criticism of this report and requested that Markus Wolf present proposals for remedying these faults.⁵

1967: General Secretary Ulbricht and Stasi Minister Mielke Are Dissatisfied with East German Foreign Intelligence

Five years later, in February 1967, in a speech at an HV A conference, Erich Mielke harshly criticized the foreign intelligence branch. In his view, although the HV A procured a huge amount of information from the West, most of it was superficial, subjective, or completely worthless. Mielke warned the HV A officers that the Stasi could “no longer afford to buy information from our agents that has zero — or only little — value,” adding sarcastically that “We are very well informed about some African states, but we still know far too little about the steps and actions planned in Bonn that are directed at the GDR and the other socialist states.” Then Mielke let the HV A know that Walter Ulbricht, the General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party, was dissatisfied with it as well, having called the agency “thin” in the sense of weak or feeble. In addition, Mielke made interesting remarks about the first use of atomic weapons, saying that the East would “throw the bomb before they [the NATO members] can throw it,” declaring this perspective “the biggest humanism.”⁶

The HV A clearly got Mielke’s message. Two years later, at the next HV A conference, the head of the SED organization within the HV A,

4 BStU, MfS, SdM 1351, p. 127.

5 A handwritten order from Mielke to Wolf to declare himself, dated 16 April 1962, in BStU, MfS, SdM 1351, p. 121. See also Protokolle der MfS-Kollegiumssitzungen, 19.3.1962, and 26.4.1962; BStU, MfS, SdM 1902, pp. 209, 225. On some of Wolf’s proposals for improving the HV A’s situation, see BStU, MfS, SdM 1351, pp. 139–40.

6 Hinweise für das Schlusswort auf der Delegiertenkonferenz der Parteiorganisation V (HV A) – 2.2.1967 [= notes Mielke used during his speech]; BStU, MfS, SdM 1343, pp. 27, 54, 56, 68, 79–81, 86–87, 92; Mielke later deleted his sarcastic words about the HV A’s knowledge about some African states from his notes. A lot of the above-quoted remarks were repeated several times in his notes and probably in his speech; see, for example, pp. 12, 19–20, 23, 32, 40, 47, 55–56, 58, 63, 65–69, 71, 75–78, 83, 118–20.

Otto Ledermann, referred directly to Mielke's criticism from 1967 in a speech. He remarked that the HV A understood very well that Mielke was concerned with introducing "a fundamentally new quality to the entire political-operational work." At the same time, Ledermann stated in the name of the HV A that it had achieved tangible improvements, both in terms of procuring information and recruiting new agents in the West.⁷ At this point, in 1969, Mielke was no longer criticizing the HV A.

Quite obviously, the HV A had now begun to profit from two developments: First, its persistence in systematically searching for new agents in the West and sending a lot of East German citizens to settle as agents in West Germany, like Günter Guillaume, the "Chancellery Spy," had started to bear fruit. Second, many young people in West Germany had grown increasingly enthusiastic about socialist ideas since the end of the 1960s.

1970s: East German Foreign Intelligence Benefits from Political and Social Changes in the West

In April 1976, Werner Großmann, then a deputy leader of the HV A and later Markus Wolf's successor, spoke at an internal Stasi conference about the increasing attractiveness and popularity of socialist ideas among young people in the West. As Marxist-Leninist convictions had spread in the West, the HV A had gained access to segments of Western society that it had not been able to penetrate before — such as students. This spread of left-wing views in the West, he concluded, had, "a promoting and aiding effect" on the recruitment of new agents in West Germany.⁸ Markus Wolf had essentially noted this same fact in January that same year. In a talk with HV A professionals, he had said, "We are undergoing a change: we see people in West Germany becoming open to our arguments whom we could not reach in the past..., such interesting groups as students and others."⁹

It is interesting to see how directly the East German foreign intelligence department benefited from general political and social changes in the West. But the most surprising aspect of these statements is the date: Only in 1976 did HV A leaders fully realize these changes and the impact they could have on their business. Indeed, in his speech in 1976, Werner Großmann admitted that the HV A had "reacted too slowly and not flexibly enough" to these new possibilities. He explained this failure as a consequence of the HV A being formed

7 BStU, MfS, SdM 1344, pp. 16, 19–20; this document contains notes without date and author. However, it undoubtedly refers to the mentioned HV A conference on 14 May 1969, and its content leads to the conclusion that the speaker was Otto Ledermann.

8 Diskussionsbeitrag Werner Großmanns auf der Kreisdelegiertenkonferenz der SED-Kreisleitung 18-01 (MfS) am 2./3.4.1976; BStU, MfS, SED-KL 3366, pp. 56–61.

9 This talk by Markus Wolf, presented at an internal Stasi conference in Dresden on 31 January 1976, exists only on a tape; BStU, MfS, BV Dresden/Tb/27 (Z).

during the hardest period of the Cold War, which made it difficult for the HV A to revise its approach.¹⁰

Speeches of other high-ranking HV A officials from the early and mid-1970s show that the HV A had been very wary of the new *Ostpolitik* (détente) of West German Chancellor Willy Brandt. For a long time, HV A officials had rejected it, viewing it as a new and a very clever version of anticommunism. In 1971, they had even declared it to be a version of Nazi politics.¹¹ Not until February 1974 at a Stasi conference did the HV A acknowledge that the changes in West Germany might support new agent recruitment in the West. Yet at that point, the HV A was still mainly afraid of the threats of *Ostpolitik*.¹²

For example, at this Stasi conference, the HV A speaker Werner Roitzsch attacked SPD politician Egon Bahr, one of the masterminds and architects of the new détente and *Ostpolitik*:

Just recently, he [Egon Bahr] characterized communism as a disease that one must cure in the long term.

This is the concisely presented objective of the political-ideological diversion as it is currently pursued by the powers of the governing coalition in Bonn.¹³

In the same speech, however, HV A officer Roitzsch first pointed to the new opportunities that these policies opened up for the agency:

The crisis of bourgeois ideology as a part of the general crisis of capitalism, the disappointment in the broadest circles of society in the imperial countries, not only among the youth — about the inhumanity and rot of the imperialistic system, about the ever increasing social insecurity — offers us great new opportunities and starting points for our political work and for the expansion of our operative basis right within the enemy camp, which we must actively make use of.¹⁴

It is typical of such documents that they are overloaded with ideological terms and undercover jargon. Nonetheless, it is easy to perceive the core meaning of these statements: the HV A, quite accurately, discerned that people in the Federal Republic, the youth, in particular, were dissatisfied with the political process. And the phrase “expansion

10 Diskussionsbeitrag Werner Großmann (see note 8), p. 58.

11 Diskussionsbeitrag Otto Ledermanns auf der Kreisdelegiertenkonferenz der SED-Kreisleitung 18-01 (MfS) am 22.5.1971; BStU, MfS, SED-KL 3448, pp. 244-48.

12 Diskussionsbeitrag Werner Roitzschs auf der Kreisdelegiertenkonferenz der SED-Kreisleitung 18-01 (MfS) am 15.2.1974; BStU, MfS, SED-KL 3363, pp. 234-41.

13 Ibid., p. 235.

14 Ibid., p. 240.

of our operative basis right within the enemy camp” meant, rather simply, recruiting new agents in West Germany.

Even if, in the early 1970s, the HV A’s fear of the effects of détente predominated, this speech from 1974 shows that it recognized that the policy offered opportunities alongside the negative effects. Consequently, an optimistic viewpoint prevailed at the HV A in the following years, as the above-mentioned speeches by Wolf and Großmann from 1976 make clear.

1980s: Peak and Decline of East German Foreign Intelligence

From a speech by Markus Wolf dated January 1983, we can identify the peak of the HV A’s success as 1982. Taking stock of the previous year, Wolf said to his employees: “Without being effusive, I may state that in 1982 our work reached a level that we had not managed to achieve in recent years.”¹⁵ Despite Wolf’s implication that 1982 was somehow exceptional, his statement actually marked the high point of a continued long-term trend: the harsh criticisms of the HV A from the 1960s had given way in the 1970s to new possibilities for recruiting HV A agents brought about by changes in West Germany society, and by January 1983, Markus Wolf could look back over an upward trajectory for the HV A that had lasted twenty years. From this perspective, the HV A could boast a record of success. At the same time, Wolf’s statement indicated a turning point — this long-term trend had come to an end.

One conclusion that can be drawn from this record is that a country’s general political situation can directly affects the work of a foreign intelligence service. However, if this conclusion is true, it begs the following question: If the increasing enthusiasm for socialist ideas in West Germany during the 1970s, the “red decade,” including an attractive image of the East German state in the West, supported the HV A’s work, what happened at the beginning of the 1980s, when the HV A’s upward trajectory leveled out?¹⁶ How had the situation in both German states changed to the detriment of HV A recruitment in West Germany?

In his talk of January 1983, Markus Wolf reflected on this question in his own way: he pointed out some important political changes in West Germany and the West that the HV A needed to be aware of as they were likely to affect its work. In Bonn, Christian Democrat

15 Auszug aus dem Referat des Genossen Generaloberst Wolf auf der Aktivtagung der Parteiorganisation der HV A am 13.1.1983; published in Hubertus Knabe, *West-Arbeit des MfS. Das Zusammenspiel von "Aufklärung" und "Abwehr"* (Berlin, 1999), 396–410, quotation, 397.

16 Although there were still protests in the 1980s, principally in connection with the Peace Movement, this constituency was not as fruitful for HV A recruitment because the attraction to the socialist countries diminished with the heightening Cold War. For more information on the Peace Movement, see the GHI’s web site nuclearcrisis.org.

Helmut Kohl had recently become chancellor, and Wolf had already realized that a shift of emphasis in relations with East Germany had taken place. For example, Kohl, when speaking about the inner German situation, used the term “two states in Germany” instead of speaking of the “two German states” (the latter term was the official one used in the Basic Treaty of 21 December 1972, in which the two Germanys had formally recognized each other as sovereign states for the first time). The new conservative government initiated stronger diplomatic activities against East Germany, and the West German foreign intelligence service, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) intensified its activities against East Germany, too. Furthermore, Wolf highlighted changes on the international level, such as the anticommunist policies of U.S. president Ronald Reagan and the active Ostpolitik of Pope John Paul II. Having explained all these shifts, Wolf stated — but already with a *defensive* undertone — that “the results of our fight in the 1970s cannot be simply wiped away.”¹⁷

Wolf was not alone in noticing developments that put it into a defensive position. Werner Groth, a leading official of HV A Department II — which undertook an important part of HV A espionage against West German political institutions — also connected political change in West Germany with diminished recruitment in his department. In a speech delivered during an internal HV A conference in January 1986 (one of several preserved on a tape in the Stasi archive), Groth reported on the state of political espionage. He noted that since Helmut Kohl had become chancellor in West Germany in 1982, ushering in a change in the political winds, his department had not been able to recruit any more valuable agents in West Germany.¹⁸ As this is a very important and remarkable statement, it shall be quoted here at length:

In the past, the pioneers of intelligence, both agents and professionals, created a number of good and very good points of departure [i.e., new sources], which, up to today, have continuously developed into top positions. We have to admit soberly that, up to now, we have still been living on their results. Of course, we created new positions year by year. But, all in all, the recruitment of new sources in the main target areas is too low. Because of this, we have information deficits that we have to eliminate fast. Add to this that sources can always drop out, also for reasons of age.

17 Ibid., 403-404, 406-407, 409.

18 This did not result from Western counterintelligence so much, although that played a role, as from the declining effectiveness of the HV A's previous strategy: In the 1970s, the HV A had won agents in the West among those who saw the East German state as an alternative to the Federal Republic. In the 1980s, this stopped working, as we can see in some comments of HV A officers. Furthermore, in the 1980s, a new generation came to maturity in both German states that did not share the experience of a common country. East Germans who were sent to West Germany undercover had to learn to behave like West Germans. Moreover, most of the younger West Germans were not at all interested in East Germany or the Eastern Bloc in general.

The number of sources not only has to be maintained, but has to be enlarged quantitatively and especially qualitatively. . . . Thus, it affects us all the more that in the third year after the so-called change [*Wende*], we as a department still have not reached a satisfying breakthrough in creating operational positions in the governmental parties.¹⁹

This speech is clear and rare evidence of a changing trend. Of course, the HV A was still operating at a very high level, but in the 1980s, its problems were increasing again.

Historian Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, an authority on American intelligence history, described a changing trend in U.S. intelligence that was roughly the reverse of the HV A's experience in his 1989 book, *The CIA and American Democracy*. Under Ronald Reagan, there was a "revival" of the CIA in the early 1980s such that "the campus radicalism of the Camelot-Ramparts-Vietnam era had died down, and it was no longer imprudent for Agency recruiters to enter university precincts..." One important indication of this trend was the dramatic increase in the number of applications and inquiries received by the CIA: in 1980, only 9,200 men and women applied for 1,458 CIA jobs; by the mid-1980s, the CIA was receiving about 150,000 inquiries per year.²⁰

Despite the opposite effects, in both the HV A and CIA cases, the general political situation affected the recruitment of agents. The development Jeffreys-Jones described was the same one HV A officials Markus Wolf, Werner Großmann, and Werner Groth described in their speeches in 1976, 1983, and 1986. It is remarkable that these speeches actually corroborate in reverse the phenomenon Jeffreys-Jones elucidated in his analyses. But it is also remarkable that HV A leaders displayed a certain helplessness in the 1980s. Although HV A officials realized the problems they faced in the 1980s, but quite obviously they failed to develop an efficient new strategy to resolve these problems.

19 Redebeitrag von Oberstleutnant Werner Groth über die Arbeit der Abteilung II der HV A auf der Delegiertenkonferenz der Parteiorganisation der SED der HV A am 16.1.1986; BStU, MfS, MfS ZAIG/Tb/5.

20 Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy* (New Haven, London, 1989), 229–30 (same in the 3rd ed., 2003).

Some Statistics

The stagnancy in recruitment that HV A officer Groth complained about in January 1986 can, in fact, be proved with some statistics derived from the HV A's SIRA database. It contains information about the type, quality, and quantity of the espionage material the HV A received from its spies, agents, and sources in the 1970s and 1980s.

At the same time, it provides some details about the profile and importance of every single one of these contacts (without revealing their real names, however, since SIRA operated only with codenames and registration numbers. The real names of sources can be found with the help of the Rosenholz files). Today, the SIRA database, divided into five sub-databases, is part of the Stasi archive.²¹

By analyzing the SIRA database, one can find out, for example, how many HV A sources continually delivered information from the West: In 1982, there were 484; in 1985, 551; and in 1987, 573 sources delivering at least ten pieces of information in the respective year.²² This is indeed an *increasing* number, but it is increasing because of a rise in economic espionage, which has its own rules. However, if one concentrates only on those agents who delivered information concerning politics in general and military politics, the result is very different: In 1982, there were 223; in 1985, 215; and in 1987, 197 sources delivering at least ten pieces of information in the respective year.²³ This gives a clear indication of the decline in political espionage in the 1980s.

The SIRA database also reveals how many of these sources served at least 15 years: Again, taking the HV A sources from all fields of HV A intelligence together, the situation looks relatively stable. One can see that in 1982, 22 percent of HV A sources had served at least 15 years, in 1985 it was 26 percent, and in 1987 it was 24 percent. Yet in the field of political espionage and military politics, the figures once again tell a different story, and, indeed, a story of an aging workforce: In 1982, 27 percent of the sources had served at least 15 years, in 1985 it was 32 percent, and in 1987 it was 34 percent.²⁴

These statistics prove that the problem of recruiting new agents described by Werner Groth in his speech in 1986 was real: The number of active sources was declining, but the mean age of these sources was increasing. So political and military political espionage in the HV A actually was stagnant in the 1980s.

Conclusion

The HV A, the GDR's foreign intelligence agency, could not act in isolation from general developments. It was shaped both by domestic and Western changes and reactions. To be sure, the HV A remained very efficient until the end, in spite of the symptoms of crisis presented here. Yet it is evident that its development corresponds to the development of the East German state. Just as the German

21 SIRA sub-database 11 was used to register information from economic espionage, SIRA sub-database 12 was used to register information concerning politics in general and military politics, SIRA sub-database 13 was used to register information about special aspects of Western infrastructure, SIRA sub-database 14 was used to register counterintelligence information, and SIRA sub-database 21 was used to register some formal information about every single source.

22 According to the Rosenholz files, the HV A was running a net of around 1,500 sources or agents in West Germany in 1988, but a lot of them were not delivering information.

23 These numbers are taken from SIRA sub-database 12.

24 The percentages of sources that had served fifteen or more years are directly related to the numbers in the first two cases. For example, the 34 percent of political espionage agents who had served fifteen years or more in 1987 derives from the 197 HV A political espionage sources that delivered at least ten pieces of information that same year.

Democratic Republic faced increasing problems in the 1980s, so, too, did its intelligence service. Similarly, like the East German political leadership, HV A leadership failed to come up with a new strategy to react to the problems of the 1980s and remain successful. Thus, it is indeed merely a legend and not truth to say that the HV A was immune to the crisis of communism but merely lost the battle because of the breakdown of the East German state. In reality, both the GDR and its secret service underwent a crisis in the 1980s.

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