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Liars, Drones and May Day Gathering Clouds

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Berlin.

Who knew what? And when? Who told whom what? And how soon? Who knew what but didn't tell it when he should have? Or, more simply: Who's been lying and for how long?

Maybe quite a few! Supposedly new, supposedly unknown facts are emerging, though many people seem to have known them all along. The giant – or humongous – NSA apparatus of the USA has been spying on its European pals for years, not only in that endlessly lightless tunnel, the “fight against terrorism,” but for plain, down-to-earth business secrets as well. Instead of angrily exposing such dirty work, or perhaps trying to limit it, the ill-famed German BND (Federal Intelligence Agency) happily joined hands (and tapes) with it, trading all kinds of secrets, maybe even that alleged tapping of Angela Merkel's private cell-phone. When that came out, German media and politicians waxed angrily indignant, they all demanded immediate stop signs while Merkel flew off to the White House in a huff to protest. Like most everybody, she soon cooled off; it seemed wiser to forgive and forget.

But forgetting is now impossible! Blaring new headlines confide that the BND not only took part in all the tap-swapping but had also informed Merkel's chancellery, at the latest in 2008, about

the jolly exchanges – and may well have continued doing so up to the present, while innocently denying any such knowledge to Bundestag committee members, not to mention the public.

Most in trouble is Thomas de Maizière, 61, a political pal of Merkel, once seen as her possible successor. This wily jack-of-all-trades has held a long string of key jobs: head of the Chancellor's Office, Minister of Defense and now, for the second time, Minister of the Interior. In every such job his hand had to be in all the spy cookie jars – the Federal Intelligence Service (BND), the Constitution Protection Bureau (VS) or the Military Counterintelligence Service (MAD). But he still looks into the cameras like a surprised innocent saying “Who, me?!”

In fact, this gentleman was equally ingenuous in earlier, similar posts in the state of Saxony, where he squatted on important information about the murderous National Socialist Underground (NSU), that secret gang which killed nine people with immigrant background plus a policewoman, set off a bloody bomb in a Turkish neighborhood and robbed a slew of banks. The three main killers (the only survivor has long been on trial in Munich) lived untroubled in Saxony for years, somehow escaping his view, although they were in frequent contact with government-paid spies and infiltrators.

If his view was not always too sharp, his views certainly are. Although his French Huguenot ancestors escaped persecution by fleeing to Germany in 1685, he supported measures against recent refugees crossing the Mediterranean so tough that, after too many headlines about drownings, they had to be revised. Though a Christian Democrat, he bashed churches for granting asylum to immigrants in trouble. He wants restrictions on Internet use and would eagerly deport Ed Snowden to the USA if he got the chance. But spies he loves: “The cooperation of the intelligence services of the USA, the United Kingdom and Germany is indispensable and must not be impaired even by a Bundestag investigation committee...”

As Minister of Defense he secretly tried to buy armed drones for Germany's Bundeswehr. The attempt cost oodles, was premature and he got slapped down. His successor, Ursula von der Leyen, now wants to buy them after all, hoping that resistance has weakened. She may be winning out.

But the question of drones is gaining attention in a different – if related – way. People are learning that the base of Ramstein in southwest Germany, the largest US military base on foreign soil, is the focal point for Barrack Obama's entire drone program of assassinating unwanted leaders, with deathly Predators or Reapers circling loudly on high, terrifying whole villages day and night before firing devastating rockets, killing all in their path, including many civilian men, women and children.

But wait; the drones do not fly directly out of Germany. That might violate official agreements all too obviously. Rather than that, as a US intelligence source stated, “Ramstein carries the signal to tell the drone what to do.”

A courageous former drone “pilot” for the US Air Force, Brandon Bryant, whose conscience made him quit such murder from afar, has dared to speak up and explain how this operates. As he told a packed audience in Berlin (and was also quoted in a long article in *Spiegel-Online*

(April 22), the pilot controlling the drones is sitting in Nevada or some other safe Air Force base. But to overcome the great distance (and the earth's curve), data from the remotely-controlled drones circling over Pakistan, the Horn of Africa or Yemen is first transmitted via satellite to Ramstein, then sent via fiber optic cable back to the USA. In addition, live pictures taken from the drone operations are analyzed in Germany and compared with other intelligence. As Bryant makes clear: "The entire drone war of the US military would not be possible without Germany." And alone on the Pakistani-Afghan border 383 US drone strikes have meant at least 2,300 known deaths, among them 416 civilians.

Like the NSA listen-in deals with the German snoops, the blood-stained tide of the drones, with its many questions about national sovereignty, is now lapping at the carefully squeaky-clean heels of Angela Merkel. While her spokesman warily double-talks to journalists: "The US government has confirmed that such armed and remote aircraft are not flown or controlled from US bases in Germany," Marcel Dickow, a leading physicist and expert on security questions, makes Merkel's quandary all too clear: "What do you do against an ally who is possibly violating international law from your own territory? The Americans are the most important strategic partner. You don't easily challenge such a partner, particularly when you use the same tools and values in the common war against international terrorism."

The relatives of several Yemeni civilian victims, now trying to take the fight against the drones to a German court, may force a decision of some kind. And all of this points up to Merkel's lasting problem. She is faced by powerful pressure from the so-called "Atlanticists," who will do anything to keep warm under the wings of the Washington eagle, whether this involves spy tactics, drone killings or sending weapons and support to the dubious gang in Ukrainian Kiev and the swastika-infested military units so closely tied up with it. Or making excuses for US tank units training in East German sites, then clanking eastwards to maneuver on Russian borders. De Maizière belongs to this group.

But Merkel also faces industrial groups who want and need investment chances and trade with Russia; buying its oil and gas, selling its goods, from peaches and cauliflower to sleek Mercedes cars. A large section of the population also wants no repeat of the disastrous military conflicts of the 20th century, despite a giant "Hate Russia, hate Putin" media wave equally reminiscent of that century. To repeat my own metaphor; she is caught with one foot on the up and one foot on the down escalator. (Plus, somehow, another very heavy, austere foot on the neck of the people of Greece!)

Worrying me, I fear, is the awful question: could the rapid development of drones, linked to a policy of pushing Germany and Europe against Russia, not only lead in disastrous directions but reflect some dreams, based partly on more planned killings, of moving toward total rule of the world?

I was able to dispel or weaken my nightmare fears on May Day, a holiday in Germany. At a big park in the wonderfully mixed borough of Kreuzberg the annual celebration was marked by what seemed at least a hundred thousand people (officially 40,000), so crowded it was hard to move through nearby streets, ringed with dozens of stands offering aromatic, mostly Turkish snacks, as well as booths with left-wing books, leaflets and discussion reflecting the ideas of ex-pat

Turkish, Kurdish, Iranian and other nationalities. Also well represented was the LINKE (Left) party, with occasional speakers poking rare holes in a prevailing loud curtain of sound from dozens of music groups. Predominant, beside the aromas, the sounds and countless children, was the good nature of the people of all colors, dress modes and languages. I saw not a single angry face – no, not even a single crying toddler.

At 7 PM, not far away, close to 20,000 mostly young people set off on the traditional “Revolutionary May Day Demonstration,” some in the equally traditional “black bloc” section, often with masked faces – and here with no signs of the LINKE party, about which most of the marchers wrinkle their anarchistically-inclined noses.

In Berlin this year few stones and bottles were thrown, only one or two cars demolished, and not many arrested or injured. In other words, it was one of the most peaceful marches in years. Only in Hamburg did a similar march have serious difficulty with the police, who broke it up.

Early in the day was the equally traditional May Day rally of the union movement, with over 400,000 taking part in 470 cities. As usual they were peaceful, with good spirits, beer and sausage and more or less militant speeches by union leaders, often celebrating the achievement, at last, of a minimum wage law while warning against attempts to poke loopholes into it. Only in Weimar, in Thuringia, was one such rally disrupted by forty or fifty neo-Nazis who seized the mic and injured four people, including the Social Democratic main speaker. This time, somewhat unusually, 22 were arrested.

At all demonstrations there were many posters, signs and stickers welcoming refugees and immigrants, in opposition to the neo-Nazis, PEGIDA and right-wing AfD-party people. There were also protests from some speakers and many marchers at the growing number of part-time or precarious jobs. Yet despite a by and large peaceful atmosphere, it was hard to ignore a current sharp increase in often controversial strikes, most seriously the train engineers who shut down almost all rail traffic last week (for the 7th time) and will now do it again, for a week or, not long ago, airline pilots, for months now workers at Amazon storage points, currently postal workers, public transport drivers in Potsdam, and in the days ahead quite possibly nursery and kindergarten personnel.

Yes, the First of May was mostly a sunny day this year, but clouds may be in the offing. Just two weeks ago there were widespread protests against the European equivalent of the US-Asian TPP trade agreement, and next week will see celebrations plus controversy about Soviet liberation of Germany 70 years ago.