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How East Germany Tried to Undermine Willy Brandt

By Klaus Wiegrefe

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Willy Brandt in 1961, as mayor of West Berlin, inspecting a sector boundary some time before the East Germans began work on the Berlin Wall. Brandt would become a controversial chancellor of West Germany.

Newly analyzed documents suggest that the East German security service, the Stasi, sought to obstruct former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's policy toward Eastern Europe, or *Ostpolitik*. Until now the story went that East German spies wanted to help Brandt. Now it seems they feared him -- but were overruled by Moscow.

The Cold War had ended, the Berlin Wall had come down and German reunification was imminent when Markus Wolf, the former head of the Stasi and East Germany's spy chief, wrote a letter to former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt. In the letter, Wolf told Brandt that he regretted "that the intelligence service of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which was under my command, contributed to the extremely negative political events that led to your resignation in 1974."

Brandt resigned from office after it was discovered that his aide, Günter Guillaume, was an East German spy.

"Well, that doesn't help much now," the former chancellor, mellowed by age, is said to have remarked after reading Wolf's apology.

Wolf's letter was another sleight-of-hand gesture in an obscure game that has puzzled historians for years. What role did intelligence services play during the era of Brandt's *Ostpolitik*?

Support from East Berlin, or Moscow ?

Ostpolitik was Brandt's particular form of détente, or de-escalation of Cold War tension. As West Germany's new chancellor in 1969 -- a Social Democrat riding a generational mood of change -- he advocated dialogue with the Soviet bloc. His so-called "opening to the East" would ease two decades of intensifying rhetoric between Moscow and Washington. Fear of nuclear war was so keen in those days that the controversial stance earned Brandt a Nobel Peace Prize in 1971.

There was, of course, a lot going on behind the scenes. Some West German politicians contacted representatives of the GDR, who worked for the Stasi, or even Soviet officials who worked for the Russian intelligence service, the KGB. East German intelligence had hundreds of spies in West Germany. Wolf's experts even bugged the house of Brandt's closest advisor, Egon Bahr.

But what did the intelligence services do with this information?

Only good things, if one is to believe Wolf's assertions up to his death in 2006. "My agency was responsible for the preparations for the policy of détente," he boasted.

Wolf, whose espionage division was part of the Stasi, the domestic East German secret police, later became chief of the whole agency. He was a native of the western state of Swabia, son of a Jewish communist father who moved to Moscow after the Nazis took power. He maintained that his spies provided East Berlin with evidence that the charismatic Brandt's intentions were serious.

The Russian Détente

Now Siegfried Suckut, an expert on the GDR, has analyzed previously unnoticed Stasi documents. They were written in 1969 and 1970, before meetings between the senior Stasi officials working for Minister of State Security Erich Mielke and their KGB counterparts.

The meetings were sometimes held in Berlin, sometimes in Moscow. But the distribution of roles was always the same -- and it contradicts Wolf's version. According to these documents the East Germans used their propaganda skills to undermine Brandt. Dozens of pages contain accusations that Brandt wanted to "restore the power of the capitalist monopoly in the GDR," and that he sought to achieve a "political and ideological softening and degradation of the socialist nations."

East German Socialists apparently feared that Brandt's policies would appeal to their Soviet comrades. They repeatedly warned them "never to underestimate the growing dangers of social democracy and revisionism!" Even in 1970, while Bonn and Moscow negotiated a treaty to renounce the use of force in settling disputes, the Stasi was up in arms, according to the documents. The East Germans argued that the social-liberal government of West Germany was trying to "drive a wedge between the USSR and the GDR."

The KGB, on the other hand, promoted détente. Yuri Andropov, the organization's coolly calculating chairman, hoped to enlist Bonn's help in modernizing the backward Soviet Union. Andropov -- who would later become a champion of President Mikhail Gorbachev -- sent the first signal to Brandt that Moscow wanted to talk. Andropov proposed secret meetings between then-President Leonid Brezhnev and the German chancellor, which were arranged by a KGB official and Bahr, Brandt's advisor.

This discreet exchange of views facilitated the ensuing talks.

Ostpolitik as a Threat to East Germany

What is so astonishing about the rediscovered documents is how self-confident the Stasi was in its criticism of the more powerful Soviets. Notes Mielke used for a meeting with Andropov in the summer of 1970 included openly skeptical questions, like: "Is Brandt's demagoguery of peace and détente being correctly assessed in the USSR?"

When supporters of *Ostpolitik*, like then-SPIEGEL publisher Rudolf Augstein and author Günter Grass, spoke at a symposium with Soviet representatives, the Stasi wrote caustically that it would be "interesting to discover the reasoning and objectives behind discussions with such softening specialists."

The documents also refute the theory that GDR spies, according to the propaganda machine of the East German Communist Party, the SED, consistently operated as "scouts of peace." After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Wolf even claimed that he and his staff had

manipulated information from the West to prevent it from being used by East German hardliners in the SED.

Nothing could have been further from the truth.

In fact, the documents indicate that the Stasi used its intelligence to paint a negative picture of *Ostpolitik* for the KGB. Stasi officials cited several internal remarks made by the chancellor or his cabinet ministers to prove that they were trying to "roll up the GDR from behind" (Brandt) or force it "into a corner" (then Foreign Minister Walter Scheel).

Questions About the Documents

The documents, however, are analyses and speaking notes, not the minutes of meetings. If minutes were kept of the meetings, they were presumably destroyed. For this reason, it cannot be ruled out that Stasi employees wrote the documents only to cover their backs, in the intrigue-filled world of the intelligence services, so that no one could accuse them of lacking sufficient ideological toughness. The real talks with KGB leaders, in other words, could have taken a different course.

According to the documents, at any rate, the KGB laid down the law at the end of 1970. By that time, Scheel and his Soviet counterpart, Andrei Gromyko, had signed the so-called Treaty of Moscow. West Germany concluded a similar agreement with Poland a few months later. Andropov made it clear to the Stasi that it should "evaluate this in a positive way."

Mielke then informed senior Stasi officers that West Germany's treaties with the East, which the Stasi had sharply criticized until recently, were in fact an "expression of the growing strength of the socialist countries."

A 'Grotesque Situation'

In this respect, it is not surprising that the Stasi bribed at least one member of the West German parliament, the Bundestag, a year later to ensure that a vote of no confidence against Brandt, supported by the conservative Christian Democratic Union and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union, would fail. (It did.) Based on the new documents, expert Suckut suspects that the East Germans were following orders from the KGB, because the East Germans' aversion to Brandt was "too great."

According to a credible witness, the KGB generals responsible for East Germany had \$1 million dollars in bribe money at their disposal. Suckut also cites a comment made by SED leader Erich Honecker a few days after the failed no-confidence vote. The party leader found it a "grotesque situation" that the East Germans, of all people, "had to appear as the strongest backers in stabilizing the Brandt administration."

Not surprisingly, Honecker was not saddened by Brandt's resignation after Guillaume was exposed. Only Wolf, as he claimed, was sorry to see Brandt step down from the chancellorship.