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# Austria as a Target of East German Espionage

## Technology theft in Austria – a phenomenon of the Cold War or more topical than ever?



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Spying out business secrets and committing technology theft certainly do not qualify as trivial offenses. Such activities have done enormous damage to Austrian companies, not to speak of other ramifications that manifested themselves over many years, such as dramatic revenue losses or, in extreme cases, even complete economic ruin, including massive employee layoffs (oftentimes in economically weak regions). During the Cold War and the division of the world into two power blocs, the parties were well aware of the opposing side's attempts to gather military, economic, and technical intelligence and therefore took appropriate countermeasures. Based on abundant sources, the present article addresses the case of technology-related intelligence activities carried out by agents of the East German Ministry for State Security on Austrian soil. As the Eastern bloc collapsed economically, many people assumed that the world would now be a peaceful, or at least more peaceful, place, with political scientist Francis Fukuyama announcing the "end of history" altogether. However, the underemployed intelligence services in both East and West would soon re-immers themselves in one of their traditional areas of operation, namely economic and industrial espionage, on an unexpected scale.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The complete collapse or downfall of a state often provides a unique, and sometimes only, opportunity to gain a more nuanced understanding of its intelligence services and their operations, provided that the relevant documents have not been destroyed by members of the deposed leadership. The economic disintegration of the so-called "Eastern bloc" in 1989/1990 brought about the end of the German

Democratic Republic (GDR), which would soon be incorporated into the reunified Federal Republic of Germany. All remaining states of the Eastern bloc continued to exist and underwent a democratic transition. However, the archives of intelligence services did not become publicly accessible or their accessibility remained limited. As already mentioned above, the case of the GDR has been exceptional, with the process of coming to terms with the dictator-

ship of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany involving access to and scientific use of the documents created by civilian and military intelligence services – of course unless obliterated in one of the preceding record destruction campaigns.

The documents of the Ministry for State Security (the “Stasi”)<sup>1</sup> came under a special management regime operated by the so-called “Federal Commissioner Preserving the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic”, usually referred to as the “Gauck Authority” after Joachim Gauck, its founder and first office holder. Subject to certain conditions, Stasi documents have been made publicly accessible, which is anything but self-evident. Had certain politicians in West Germany and former members of the Stasi in East Germany been able to impose their will, the documents might have remained under seal or might even have been destroyed. That this did not happen was due to a spirited campaign led by the East German civil rights movement (Krieger/Weber 1997, 11).

## **2. STASI – THE “SHIELD AND SWORD OF THE PARTY”**

The ability of the Socialist Unity Party to consolidate and maintain its power was contingent upon the protection extended to it by the USSR as well as upon the establishment of a gigantic security apparatus. The true proportions of the operations carried out by this machinery of repression and control, which became apparent after the archives were made publicly available, surpassed the predictions of even the most astute and prescient analysts (Schroeder 2000, 430).

Based on its origins and its primary objective, the East German State Security was a secret police tasked with the surveillance and combating of the (purported) enemies of the one-party dictatorship. At

the same time, the Stasi was one of the most successful intelligence and counter-intelligence services in the world. Over the years, it grew into a major bureaucratic agency with a variety of further responsibilities, including personal protection, border control, and arms and technology trading (Gieseke 2000, 5).

Its foreign intelligence agency, known as the “Main Reconnaissance Administration”, led for many years by Markus Wolf, enjoyed a stellar reputation thanks to its spectacularly successful missions. Such missions included placing the agent Günter Guillaume in the closest entourage of West German Chancellor Willy Brandt or the activities of “Topas” (also known as Rainer Rupp) within NATO’s International Staff in Brussels. However, the Administration suffered a heavy blow in 1979 when Lieutenant Werner Stiller<sup>2</sup>, a senior officer in the Sector for Science and Technology, made a successful escape (Stiller 1986, 448). The origins of the Administration can be traced back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Conference of the Socialist Unity Party in 1956, which defined global competitiveness in all areas of the economy as an overarching goal, requiring rapid development in science and technology.

Günter Mittag, a member of the politburo and senior economic official, played a key role in coordinating scientific and technological development with the operations of the Stasi. Not only did he obtain information from the Stasi, he also worked together with the Ministry of Foreign Trade and especially Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski, who, as Head of the Department of Commercial Coordination, supervised East Germany’s foreign currency reserves, served as a secret Stasi officer on special deployment, and was a close “business partner” of the Bavarian Prime Minister and “class enemy” Franz Josef Strauß. Moreover, Mittag cooperated

with several ministries responsible for the field of science, including the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Ministry of Electronics. In the 1980s, the Stasi, Schalck-Golodkowski, Mittag and the Ministry of Electronics colluded to get hold of computers that were subject to Western embargo (Macrakis 1997, 61 et seq.). See in more detail below.

### 3. THE EAST GERMAN ECONOMY

Both German states started out from essentially the same position (i.e., war-torn cities, obliterated assets, and destroyed capital stock) following the end of World War II in 1945. Moreover, both states were urged or even forced to adopt the social and economic arrangements of the respective occupying powers. The socialist system of the GDR and other countries turned out to be inferior and ended in economic, social, and political bankruptcy. By the end of the 1980s, most capital stock in the GDR had become worn out, which resulted in an increasingly frequent need for repairs due to the high average age of industrial equipment. Accordingly, the East German economy was characterized by low levels of efficiency and productivity. The low levels of labor productivity resulted in chronic labor shortages. The intensification of production failed to live up to expectations, economic modernization came to a standstill (with a “modernization backlog” of at least 20 years) and, ultimately, the state even lost its ability to replace its depreciating capital stock. Despite enormous political efforts to launch an “export offensive” during the last decade of its existence, East Germany was unable to curb dramatically rising levels of external debt (Schroeder 2000, 509 et seq.). Sovereign default was imminent.

### 4. ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN EAST GERMANY AND AUSTRIA

The GDR only managed to gain international acceptance after concluding the so-called “Basic Treaty” with the Federal Republic of Germany in December 1972. The Basic Treaty helped East Germany achieve one of its most important goals, i.e., recognition of its sovereignty and borders.

The Basic Treaty rendered the so-called Hallstein Doctrine of 1955, which provided for a breakoff of diplomatic relations between West Germany and any state recognizing the GDR, inoperative. East Germany managed to establish diplomatic relations with 20 states, including Austria, in the same month that the Treaty was signed (Weber 1988, 84 et seq.).

In 1972, i.e., the year of Austria and the GDR establishing diplomatic relations, the Federal Chancellor of Austria was Bruno Kreisky. Kreisky’s personal hobbyhorse was foreign policy; moreover, he had already cultivated contacts in East European states and had a proclivity for positioning himself as a pioneer. However, trade relations between Austria and East Germany had predated his time in office.

Following the end of World War II, Austria and the GDR did not conclude any intergovernmental agreement regulating economic relations between both states. Bilateral trade was conducted on the compensation level and on quasi-private grounds. Despite a significant upsurge between 1951 and 1953, East Germany’s share remained at one to two percent of Austria’s total foreign trade volume. Trade relations with Austria were equally marginal to the GDR. Due to the susceptibility of light industry to crises, Austrian partners were mainly interested in export markets for “simple” consumer goods. The GDR, for its part, used this opportunity to

import strategically important materials subject to shortages. Moreover, East Germany also purchased goods originating from other countries from Austria; accordingly, a portion of the goods exported was intended for re-exportation. A normalization of the trade relationship occurred in 1953. However, the respective national governments were not involved in the process; rather, it was put into practice by the Austrian Federal Chamber of Commerce and the East German Chamber of Foreign Trade. The exchange of goods continued to be based on mutual compensation and reciprocity. Problematic aspects included the lack of appropriate quality standards in East German machine engineering as well as lax delivery times and conditions.

Austria's most important trade partners were the US and West Germany. Because Austria failed to modernize its economy, its trade balance with almost all Western states was negative. On the other hand, Austria maintained a positive trade balance with most members of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance ("Comecon"), comprising the states of the Eastern bloc, which contributed to an increasing focus on the markets of Eastern and Central Eastern Europe. However, the relationship with West Germany, Austria's most important trade partner, was instrumental in shaping the Austrian stance towards the GDR and resulted in the marginal nature of its trade relations with East Germany.

Austria was engaging in the same balancing exercise during the 1960s, seeking to reconcile its orientation towards the European Community with its interest in long-term trade agreements with Comecon states. Since the government in East Berlin was aiming to modernize the East German economy, it had to make more intensive use of science and technology, which, in turn, resulted in heightened interest in the Austrian economy as a supplier of state-

of-the-art technology. Although economic ties between both states had remained modest, East German trade policy defined Austria as a "focal country" in 1966.

Bilateral economic relations reached a new level in the early 1970s. Following the recent normalization of diplomatic relations, Austria and East Germany signed a first official agreement on the further expansion of commercial relations, followed by a second treaty on economic, industrial, and technological cooperation in 1974. The nationalized steel industries of both countries, as well as the chemical, machine engineering, and electrical engineering industries, expressed strong interest in stepping up mutual cooperation in research and development (Boyer 2005).

The Austrian foreign trade with the GDR experienced a "golden age" between 1979 and 1986. Bilateral trade was characterized by enormous growth rates at the end of the 1970s. Exports to East Germany grew by 76.8 percent in 1983 and imports from East Germany had also increased considerably after 1979. In the 1980s, 50 to 60 percent of the bilateral trade between both economies was conducted by a company called "Novum", which was led by trustees of Austrian nationality with ties to the Communist Party of Austria. Thanks to its role as an intermediary, Novum earned substantial profits. Furthermore, close ties existed between the East German Department of Commercial Coordination and the economic apparatus of the Communist Party of Austria.

Chancellor Kreisky perceived trade with the GDR as an opportunity to mitigate the negative consequences of the global economic crisis, and especially the steel crisis, for Austria's nationalized industries (Stolzlechner 2005). However, excellent economic relations between both states did not preclude the Stasi from "abusing" Austria for intelligence purposes and illicit activities.

## 5. AUSTRIA AS AN ATTRACTIVE AREA OF OPERATION

Vienna had a number of special attractions for Eastern intelligence services. The first such attraction was the geopolitical situation of Austria, i.e., Vienna's role as a political buffer zone and a diplomatic hub. For the Czechoslovak and Hungarian intelligence services, the geographical proximity made Vienna an ideal area of operation, since agents had the opportunity to disappear rapidly behind the "Iron Curtain". The East German State Security made use of this opportunity as well (Möchel 1992, 12).

Furthermore, Austrian neutrality was an important factor for foreign espionage activities. Citizens of states of the Eastern bloc had an easier time traveling to a neutral country than to a NATO member state. As a UN seat, Vienna provided numerous international organizations with the opportunity to accommodate members of intelligence services (Möchel 1992, 16).

A further attraction of Austria as an area of operation for intelligence services was the legal environment, with the relevant Austrian law imposing relatively modest sentences on individuals found guilty of espionage.

Espionage activities in Austria were primarily directed against rival intelligence services operating on Austrian soil rather than against Austria itself.<sup>3</sup> The Stasi mainly used Austria as a meeting point and as a transit country. Moreover, the focus of the East German intelligence service also extended to the CIA and the West German Federal Intelligence Service (Möchel 1992, 247). Economic espionage was a further major field of reconnaissance. Austria was a leader in several areas of industrial development and, therefore, Eastern intelligence services in particular were seeking to obtain relevant information.

## 6. THE STASI'S ECONOMIC ESPIONAGE AND TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER ACTIVITIES

The exchange of some types of knowledge between the East and the West was legal; however, embargo provisions and industrial restrictions prohibited most forms of technology exports and transfer to the Eastern bloc.

Confidentiality policies excluded internal corporate information as well as military science and technology from the scope of free exchange. In a reaction to these restrictions, Eastern intelligence agencies established organizational units for scientific and technological reconnaissance in order to be able to cover the increasing technological demands of their respective countries (Macrakis 1997, 61). The GDR played a pivotal role in acquiring scientific results and technological know-how from the West and transferring it to other countries within the Eastern bloc, especially the USSR. The Vienna Residentur of the Stasi has been described as a primary link in the transfer of technology between East and West (Macrakis 1997, 60 et seq.).

The GDR had two main channels for the "illegal, semi-legal, and legal acquisition of Western technology". The semi-legal, and sometimes legal, channel was the import of Western goods by the Ministry of Foreign Trade and especially the Department of Commercial Coordination, established in 1966 and led by the above-mentioned Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski. Although the Ministry of Foreign Trade did not officially qualify as an intelligence agency, several senior officials were either fulltime or unofficial employees of the Stasi. The Department of Commercial Coordination was responsible for laundering the hard currency used by the East German government and the Stasi and established front organizations in order to be able to do business with Western corporations.

According to certain sources, up to 90 percent of the microelectronic equipment available in East Germany at the time had been illegally purchased by Schalck-Golodkowski himself.

The second channel of acquisition was the Main Reconnaissance Administration's Sector for Science and Technology. While the Department of Commercial Coordination focused on the acquisition of equipment, especially computers, the Sector for Science and Technology was engaging in typical espionage activities, such as obtaining layouts, designs, scientific information and, later on, devices, using agents deployed in the West. Moreover, the Sector for Science and Technology also continually analyzed the enemy's scientific and technological achievements. The fact that the headcount of the Sector increased from 35 officers in the 1950s to 300 to 400 employees at the time of the collapse of East Germany is indicative of the increasing importance of this organization (Macrakis 1997, 63–69).

## 7. VIENNA AS A CENTER OF TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

In order to be able to circumvent the embargo<sup>4</sup>, the Sector for Science and Technology used neutral states to acquire high-tech goods. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the GDR, the USSR, and other countries of the Eastern bloc often used Austria for such activities. The Sector for Science and Technology exported materials from the neutral Austria to East Germany and maintained an illegal unit (a so-called Residentur) in Vienna. The Residentur established high-tech companies as front organizations to cover up the activities of the Sector for Science and Technology. In this way, East Berlin was able to import scientific equipment from countries that were prohibited from exporting embargoed goods to the Eastern bloc. Much of

this equipment came into East Germany via Austria. For instance, the GDR was interested in importing equipment to support its plastics industry in the late 1960s; more specifically, it targeted an entire installation manufactured by the West German Uhde-Hoechst company. Because the Stasi assumed that this installation was included in the list of embargoed goods, it was decided to acquire it via Austria (Macrakis 1997, 73).

1971 was a milestone year. Horst Müller, an officer of the Sector for Science and Technology, managed to recruit Rudi Wein, an Austrian businessman with communist leanings, followed by the gradual addition of other agents to the team. The GDR set up a reconnaissance unit in Vienna. Front organizations with close ties to East Germany were established. Many of the bank accounts were maintained in Switzerland. Most information acquired by these organizations originated from the Silicon Valley in the United States (Pretterebner 1989, 104). Udo Proksch, a colorful figure and a founding member of Club 45, the club of the Social Democratic Party of Austria, and the above-mentioned Rudi Wein had started to set up high-tech companies (such as Kibolac, Rudolf Sacher Inc., and Lylac) at the end of the 1960s, i.e., even before the Vienna Residentur launched its operations. The companies were all engaging in illegal technology transfer and maintained excellent business relations with the GDR. Initially, the Austrians were unaware of the fact that the companies were operated by a foreign intelligence service. The Vienna Residentur was eventually exposed by Werner Stiller (Macrakis 1997, 73 et seq.).

One case of economic espionage had already leaked out during the 1960s. Five agents of the GDR were arrested in December 1964 for espionage activities at the Plansee Metal Works in Tirol (which,

as a high-tech company, was a permanent target for espionage), at the United Austrian Iron and Steel Works (VOEST), and the Semperit company. Furthermore, the East German services managed to plant an agent as a secretary in the federal headquarters of the Austrian People's Party (Siebenmorgen 1993, 121).

### **8. DIGRESSION: NEUTRAL SWITZERLAND AS A HUB OF TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER**

The records kept at the office of the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Archives give a clear indication of the supreme importance of Switzerland for the acquisition of embargoed goods by circumventing Western export restrictions as well as for the acquisition of hard-to-obtain goods from non-socialist countries. However, only a limited number of Swiss companies knowingly cooperated and did so only in exchange for high "risk surcharges". The most important actors were two Swiss businessmen. However, the real magnitude of economic espionage activities in Switzerland is difficult to assess, because the relevant documents have been destroyed (Veleff 2006, 83). In any case, Austria was usually preferred over Switzerland as a transit country or a site for operational meetings, because Austria did not impose a visa requirement on citizens of the GDR (Veleff 2006, 30).

### **9. POST-COLD WAR PERIOD: BOOMING ECONOMIC ESPIONAGE**

"As long as we have no trouble and no brouhaha, everything will be fine [...]." According to Austrian journalist Kid Möchel, this attitude characterizes the attitudes towards the activities of Stasi agents in Austria. Austria has never attempted to undertake a comprehensive appraisal of East German espionage activities on its

territory. With a few exceptions, media coverage of the topic has also been rather modest. The relevant statute of limitations is probably not the only reason for the scant interest displayed by Austrian politics and the public as well as by the investigating authorities.

The end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the "old enemy" brought about major organizational changes in the intelligence services, which had to find new responsibilities for themselves. These new responsibilities included, among others, economic espionage. Pierre Marion, a former head of the French Directorate-General for External Security, acknowledged publicly in 1991 that a relevant unit had been created in France.

His exact words on the subject were: "We should not be suffering from a guilt complex. All countries are engaging in such activities, especially the Japanese and the Soviets, but also the Americans" (Mayer 1993, 30). A relevant example from the early 1990s is as follows. A third-world country was planning to set up a nuclear plant. Three organizations submitted bids in response to the call for tenders: a Japanese company, a US company, and a multinational company with British partners. Apparently, both the CIA and the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) intercepted communications from the Japanese company and exchanged the information obtained. From what the CIA and the GCHQ overheard, the Japanese company received the order despite not submitting the most favorable bid, because it had paid significantly higher bribes to the authorities than its rivals. Ostensibly, this intelligence led to a heated debate between Washington and Tokyo (Dallas 1992, 41). CIA director William Gates and FBI director William Session said at a US House of Representatives committee hearing in April 1992 that, after the end of the

Cold War, the focus of their organizations would increasingly shift to combating economic espionage. According to Gates' and Session's statements, there are a total of 20 Asian, East European, Middle Eastern, and Latin American governments engaging in activities detrimental to the American economy (Mayer 1993, 30).

Austria might have been able to bury its head in the sand when it came to crimes that had already "become historical". However, various Austrian authorities have been forced to acknowledge that Austrian companies that have internationally competitive capabilities in terms of innovation, research, know-how, and production quality or are even global leaders in these fields are increasingly falling prey to "misappropriations of trade secrets or confidential business information (Section 124 of the Austrian Criminal Code), attempted both by foreign intelligence agencies and competing companies (Schlichtherle 2010, 63). In 2012, the "Windtec case" caused quite a stir in Austria: this involved an employee of the Klagenfurt-based wind turbine designer AMSC Windtec passing on the details of various programs operated by the company to its Chinese rival Sinovel in exchange for payment. Although the employee was convicted, the economic damage nevertheless remained enormous. Windtec suffered a major drop in sales and was forced to lay off employees, because Sinovel had acquired the ability to make more cost-efficient offers. Since this act of treason affected the American parent company as well, it even called for the extradition of the convicted employee to the US (Der Standard 2012).

However, companies are usually reluctant to openly address having become a victim of technology theft. The reason for this reluctance is that, if a case of espionage becomes publicly known, it might turn into an economic death sentence for compa-

nies, especially in the supply sector, which is particularly significant in Austria. As a matter of fact, Austria is the only country for which no exact data are available. With China, Russia, and emerging countries like India and Brazil seeking to raise their levels of economic development, some experts expect a further increase in economic espionage activities over the coming years. Some say that even the US is pursuing such activities (Die Presse 2010).

Consequently, Austria has a justified interest in protecting domestic companies. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism therefore developed an awareness program (Schlichtherle 2010, 63) on the subject.

The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism, the University of Applied Sciences Vienna, the Austrian Economic Chamber, and the Federation of Austrian Industries conducted a joint study as part of the "Dangers of Economic and Industrial Espionage for the Austrian Economy" project during the first half of 2010. The study resulted in the publication of a manual entitled "Economic and Industrial Espionage: Know-how Protection for the Austrian Economy", which, just as the Security Platform<sup>5</sup>, has been very well received by Austrian companies. The goal of the competent security authorities is to make company executives aware of the fact that organizations of all sizes and revenue and market penetration levels might be susceptible to economic and industrial espionage (Verfassungsschutzbericht 2012).

However, economic and industrial espionage are not truly new branches of intelligence gathering. Attempts to spy out technical know-how have been ubiquitous throughout history. Some one and a half million years ago, a predecessor of modern humans learned how to light an artificial fire by watching someone else do it.

The first “real” case of economic espionage dates back to around 1500 BC when a Chinese princess used a headdress decorated with flowers to smuggle silkworms out of the country for the first time and bring them to her bridegroom in India. In 552 AD, two monks transported silkworm eggs in hollow walking sticks to Byzantium to present them as a gift to Empress

Theodora. From Byzantium, the manufacture of silk would then expand to Greece, Italy, and France. The list of goods and inventions that have attracted intelligence agents’ interest over the centuries is endless. Nowadays, the main attractions seem to be electrical engineering and high-tech products (Mayer 1993, 30).

<sup>1</sup> *The records of the military intelligence agency are held at the German Federal Military Archives in Freiburg.*

<sup>2</sup> *Stiller’s escape plunged his former agency into a crisis. Until Stiller’s escape, Western intelligence services knew very little about the Sector; they had only registered an increase in industrial espionage over the 1970s. Stiller’s testimonies, however, resulted not only in the exposure of GDR agents but also agents deployed at companies and research institutions.*

<sup>3</sup> *Relevant sources, especially applicable SIRA records, are indicative of the magnitude of the East German interest in Austria as a site of intelligence gathering. The electronic databases of the Main Reconnaissance Administration (i.e., the espionage department of the Stasi) are known as SIRA (i.e., System of Information Research).*

<sup>4</sup> *The US, the UK, France, Italy, and the Benelux states established the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (CoCom) in 1949 with the aim of preventing the USSR and its allies from increasing their military power by gaining access to Western high-tech solutions; cf. Hartmann/Stock 1984, 30.*

<sup>5</sup> [www.sicherheitsportal.at/wis](http://www.sicherheitsportal.at/wis).

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