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Women Agents in the East German State Security

Abstract:

In the communist camp during the Cold War, exercising power was a male domain. The Ministry of State Security (MfS) of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) was no exception. Within the organization, women were employed but they rarely made a career. In the bottom of the State Security hierarchy were the agents. This article examines who were the women agents in the rank of the MfS. Based on statistical materials, it gives an overview of women's role and the character of their covert work. Inspired by Andrea Petö's introduction of the concept of controlling images to intelligence studies, particular focus is devoted to the question whether the MfS agents complied to the stereotypes of women in intelligence work.

Keywords:

GDR, Ministry of State Security (MfS), domestic security, foreign Intelligence, Women agents

Introduction

In 2020, the Hungarian professor for Gender Studies at the Central European University, Andrea Petö published an article on women in Hungarian Intelligence during the Cold War. She characterized the communist intelligence agencies not just as strict hierarchic but also as organizations with a gender-based hierarchy. On the bottom of the “pecking order” were the informants and the higher in the hierarchy one got, the lesser women were to be found.¹ In the GDR, the overall impression was similar: Less than a fifth of the full-time employees of the East German State Security were women.² This made it possible for wives and daughters to find suitable profession in the “family enterprise”. However, their chances to make a carrier were modest at best, and all higher manage positions were men. “Real chekist work” was male, and Women were primarily found in lower prestige parts of the security organization.³ Despite proclaimed gender equality in the socialist countries, exerting “the power of the working class” remained in the domain of men.⁴

Petö introduced into the intelligence equation the notion of *controlling images* as “an image that naturalizes and normalizes sexism and posits it as an unavoidable part of everyday life” used “in order to reinstate the traditional patriarchal rule”. In intelligence they boiled down to three stereotypes: the lustful, wanton dancer; the self-sacrificing, and the noble spirited woman patriot.⁵ This article focuses on the role of women bottom of the “pecking order”, the agents of the East German State Security. It offers a statistic overview of their functions as well as an insight into how women agents within foreign intelligence fitted into the stereotypes.

In Germany, gender issues have not played a major role in the massive research of the former Ministry of State Security (MfS). Since the early 1990’s, “the Stasi”, it’s structures, and representatives have dominated both the public and academic discourse about the GDR. The State invested billions of marks and euros into a special Federal Commissioners Offices (BStU) for the safekeeping and interpretation of the files of the former MfS. For almost a generation, due to direct access to the files and a vast research budget, this organization which today is integrated into the German Federal

¹ Andrea Petö: (2020) A gender history of Hungarian intelligence services during the Cold War, *Journal of Intelligence History*, 19:2, pp.197-212, here p. 207.

² Mathias Finster, Philipp Reimann Anja Zschirpe: (2017): *Im Dienst der Staatssicherheit. Eine soziologische Studie über die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter des DDR-Geheimdienstes*. Frankfurt a.M.: Campusverlag. p. 119.

³ Jens Gieseke (2000): *Die Hauptamtliche Mitarbeiter der Staatssicherheit. Personalstruktur und Lebenswelt 1950-1989/90*. Berlin: Chr. Links Verlag. p. 335, 394-395, 432.

⁴ A general analysis of women in the GDR can be found here: Anne Kaminsky (2016): *Frauen in der DDR*. Berlin: Links Verlag.

⁵ Petö (2020), p 1.

Archives set the agenda for GDR research. Among the BStU research prioritizing gender did not rank first. Nonetheless, a handful of researchers were able to establish the field as a niche within MfS-studies which has predominantly been published in German. One of the few BStU researchers who dealt with women in the MfS is Angela Schmole who since the 1990's has published on the subject.⁶ Important independent research contributions were the work of the journalist Annette Maennel and the Thuringian historian Renate Ellmenreich. Both took up the subject on women in East German state security and put a particular emphasis on the domestic apparatus of the MfS.⁷ Individual stories have been presented by for instance the journalist Gerald Praschl.⁸ Women in foreign intelligence have primarily been described in the popular scientific publication by the journalist Wilhelm Dietl and Marianne Quorin.⁹ From a scholarly perspective, the subject has been dealt with by the historian Katja Augustin.¹⁰ Both the journalist and scholars have displayed prominent interest to seduction, thus to some extent abiding to the controlling image of women roles in intelligence.

Who and how many?

Due to the mass of documents released upon the dissolution of the GDR quantitative methodology has played a prominent role in understanding the State Security structures, which left 111 running kilometers of archive, documenting the work of its 91.015 employees and 189.00 agents.¹¹ The administrative mass of the former ministry's 209 municipal offices, 15 district offices, and 40 central departments and main departments in Berlin made this approach rational. However, because of the large structure, it is not easy to give an unambiguous impression of the share and character of women participation in the covert operation of the MfS.

⁶Angela Schmole (1996): Frauen und MfS, in: Deutschland Archiv 29, 4, pp. 512–525; Angela Schmole (2001): Frauen im Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, in: Horch und Guck 10, 34, pp. 15–19; Angela Schmole (2005): Die Spitzenfrauen des MfS. Bei der Staatssicherheit diente das weibliche Personal nur selten in gehobenen Stellungen. in: Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat 18, pp. 107–114.

⁷Annette Maennel (1995): Frauen zwischen Alltag und Konspiration. Zur IM-Problematik, in: Horch und Guck 4,14; Renate Ellmenreich (1994): Frauenbild im Ministerium für Staatssicherheit der DDR – Mein Einblick, in: Unabhängiger Frauenverband (ed.): Weibblick 16, pp. 14–16, hier 14; Renate Ellmenreich (1999): Frauen bei der Stasi. Am Beispiel der MfS-Bezirksverwaltung Gera. Erfurt: "Der Landesbeauftragte des Freistaates Thüringen für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR informiert.

⁸Gerald Praschl (1999): Zwei Frauen und das MfS. Gleichberechtigung bei Mielke. Auch Frauen durften mitmachen, in: Horch und Guck 8, 26, pp. 46–67.

⁹Marianne Quorin (1999): Agentinnen aus Liebe. Warum Frauen für den Osten spionierten. Frankfurt (Main): Edition Berolina; Wilhelm Dietl (2006): Spy ladies. Frauen im Geheimdienst. Berlin: Ullstein.

¹⁰Katja Augustin (2002): Verführerinnen und Verführte. Frauen und die Staatssicherheit In: Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Ed.): Duell im Dunkel. Spionage im geteilten Deutschland. Cologne: Böhlau Verlag. pp. 99–109

¹¹ Numbers are from 1989.

Renate Ellmenreich examined the files of the district office of the MfS in the Gera region in Eastern Thuringia and proposed a women agent share of 16,7 percent in the municipal offices.¹² Numbers from other municipal offices show that this was likely even to be in the high end of the spectrum. Other municipal offices in today's Thuringia like Bad Salzungen (1988) and Weimar (1984) had a women agent share of selectively 12% and 13,5%; in Wenigerode (1984) and Stendal (1989) in Saxony-Anhalt it were 12,2% and 15,8%, whereas in Sternberg (1974) and Bützow (1978) in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania it were only 4,9% and 8,1%.¹³

On the middle administrative level of the district (Bezirke), the number proved to be slightly higher. In the district administration Gera, the MfS recruited 22,3 percent women (1989). This was a bit higher than some of the others of the MfS regional branches. In the Karl-Marx-Stadt region in Saxony, it was 14 percent (1989), in Rostock in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania 10 percent (1989), in the district of Magdeburg in Saxony-Anhalt 12 percent, and in Frankfurt/ Oder 14,9 percent.¹⁴

On a national level, the estimates slightly vary. Annette Maennel estimated the share to be between ten and 15 percent, and Angela Schmole almost agreed with ten and 16 percent.¹⁵ In his analysis of denunciation, the Polish researcher Karol Sauerland assessed women's share only at ten percent.¹⁶ The overall picture of the women participation within the GDR showed that the agent business was predominantly male. Even on this level in the pecking order, gender equality was far from being achieved in the socialist German state. This of course raises the question whether the low women's share of agents was isolated to the GDR. Though, exact statistics are not available for any other part of history, the state of art suggests that other German agencies had been equally reluctant to involve women in the covert sphere of men.¹⁷ East German estimates of their Western opponent the

¹² Ellmenreich (1994), p. 14.

¹³ Bundesarchiv (BA): MfS, BV Schwerin, KD Bützow Nr. 10164, Bl. 12; BKG Nr. 646b, p. 53, 55, 58, 76, 92; MfS, BV Magdeburg, AKG Nr. 199, p. 331; MfS, BV Erfurt, KD Weimar Nr. 14, Bl. 4; MfS, BV Magdeburg, KD Stendal Nr. 16, p. 5; MfS, BV Suhl, BdL Nr. 750, p. 141.

¹⁴ BA: MfS, BV Magdeburg, AKG Nr. 199, p. 331; MfS, BV Karl-Marx-Stadt, AKG Nr. 3502, p. 28; MfS, BV Leipzig, Abt. II Nr. 113/1, p. 159; BStU, MfS, BV Frankfurt (Oder), Abt. XII Nr. 366, pp. 1–28; Frankfurt (Oder), Abt. XII Nr. 360, pp. 21–55; Frankfurt (Oder), Abt. XII Nr. 361, pp. 55–81; Frankfurt (Oder), Abt. XII Nr. 363, pp. 17–67; Frankfurt (Oder), Abt. XII Nr. 364, pp. 113–137 und 170–194; MfS, BV Rostock, Abt. XII Nr. 71, p. 95.

¹⁵ Maennel (1995), p.121; Schmole (1996), p. 518.

¹⁶ Karol Sauerland (2000): 30 Silberlinge. Denunziation – Gegenwart und Geschichte. Berlin: Volk und Welt, p. 45.

¹⁷ André Brissaud (1996): Canaris. Legende und Wirklichkeit. Augsburg: Bechtermünz Verlag, p. 18, 50, 58, 93, 95; Gert Buchheit (1969): Die anonyme Macht. Frankfurt (Main): Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft, p. 288, 291; Eugen Weyde (1965): Die trojanische List. Cologne: Markus Verlag, p. 63; Hermann Rauschening (1940): Gespräche mit Hitler. New York: Europa Verlag, p. 250; Hans-Joachim Heuer (1997): Geheime Staatspolizei. Über das Töten und Tendenzen der Entzivilisierung. Berlin: De Gruyter, p. 57.

Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) was that it between 1954 and 1968 recruited around 12 percent women.¹⁸ Still, post-Cold War sociological surveys showed that the BND managed to bring the gender (im)balance among its employees from 100 percent men in 1949 to 40 percent in 1964.¹⁹

To some extent, the overall numbers erase nuances between different areas of responsibility of the MfS. Some fields were clearly above average. In the Main Department II (Counterintelligence) on average every fourth agent was a woman, whereas department 9 of Main Department XX counted staggering 40 percent (1981) in the networks which targeted domestic opposition groups.²⁰

The reasons why women agreed to work for the MfS has been already analyzed in 1968 by major Manfred Hempel in a PhD dissertation at the academy of the MfS, the so called “School of Law Potsdam”. Hempel concluded that men and women differed insignificantly in their different types of motivation. Only the category “life skills” played a clearly higher role for men (38,2 percent) than for women (18.6 percent).²¹ On the other side, more women than men viewed their agent activity as an end in itself. Thus, women agents were more likely to strive for success and were inclined to avoid the risk of failure. Probably, as a product of this aspiration, praise and recognition as “the most important driving force” was higher among female (21 percent) than male agents (15,4 percent).²² Correspondingly, fewer women viewed rebuke as a “weak driving force” (14 percent) than men (15,4 percent).²³

Later Hempel taught operative psychology as a professor with rank of colonel at the MfS academy. He resolved that women were more disposed to ponder whether their covert activities were “morally justified”.²⁴ At the time of his analysis, approximately 51,2% of the women had “no reservations” to their commitment, contrary to 43,9 percent of their male co-fighters at the “invisible front”. Whereas 9,3% of the men felt “strong reservation” this was on the case with 7,7 percent of the women.²⁵ Despite, these few differences, Hempel concluded that gender played either no or only a secondary

¹⁸ Albrecht Charisius, Julius Mader (1969): *Nicht länger geheim*. Berlin: Deutscher Militärverlag, p. 435.

¹⁹ Christoph Rass (2016): *Das Sozialprofil des Bundesnachrichtendienstes. Von den Anfängen bis 1968*. Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag. P. 71-73.

²⁰ BA: MfS, HA II: *Einschätzung des Standes und der Qualität der Arbeit mit dem IM/GMS-System*, 1.6.1972; MfS, HA II Nr. 22899, p. 5; MfS, HA XX/9, Nr. 1010, p. 8.

²¹ BA: MfS, JHS Nr. 21775, Bd. 2, Manfred Hempel: *Die Wirkung moralischer Faktoren im Verhalten der Bürger der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zur inoffiziellen Zusammenarbeit mit den Organen des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit*. Potsdam 1967; BStU, MfS, JHS Nr. 21775, p. 2.

²² *Ibid.* p. 66.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 74.

²⁴ 97,7 percent women to 94,3 percent men. *Ibid.* p. 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 12.

role for a potential agent's will to cooperate with the MfS.²⁶ To turn this argument around, motivation could not explain the low women share of the MfS agent. Based on their motivation to cooperate, women were just as likely or unlikely as men to play a role in the repressive apparatus. In a very practical way, traditional family roles might stand in the way of the extra career as an agent. Already, East German women were double jobbing as housewives and on the job market. Thus, additional obligations could result in unnecessary individual stress. Furthermore, women might be hampered in their operative possibilities by their spouse's expectations to account for their whereabouts in their spare time. In cases where the partner or close family needed care, an MfS commitment usually came to a partial or total standstill.²⁷

MfS Agents – or so called unofficial collaborators, in German IM (Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter) - were roughly sorted into six categories, which can be ranked as follows IMK (safe house keeper), GMS (cooperating state and party functionaries), IMS (Agents safeguarding security interest), IME (agents with specialist skills), IMB (agent with enemy contact), and FIM (agent with leading responsibilities).²⁸ For the beforementioned district Gera in Thuringia, the characteristics of the agent networks also concerning gender aspects has been examined by the historian Regina Karell.²⁹ Here, women were overrepresented in the lesser prestigious categories, IMK³⁰ and GMS³¹.³² In other words, women agents were most likely to be either lending her apartment to the state security or working as a lower level state functionary in for instance the international department of a university or a municipal administration. The agents with security responsibility (IMS) were the backbone of the MfS surveillance of East German society. Generally, they were the informants within industry or organizations, counting more than every second agents in the GDR (1988: 54,1 percent).³³ However, among women agents in Gera, barely every third (31 percent) belonged to this important group.³⁴ A notable exception to the rule that women played subordinate roles, were the two percent of IMB

²⁶ Ibid. p. 90.

²⁷ Ibid. pp. 41–47.

²⁸ Helmut Müller-Enbergs (1996): *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit. Teil 1: Richtlinien und Durchführungsbestimmungen*. Berlin: Chr. Links Verlag. p. 62-83.

²⁹ Regina Karell (2008): *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiterinnen der DDR-Staatssicherheit im Bezirk Gera 1989*. Erfurt: Landesbeauftragte des Freistaates Thüringen für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR.

³⁰ 38 percent of all Women agent belonged to this category though it only constituted

³¹ 29 percent of all Women agent belonged to this category though it only constituted 19,2 of all agents.

³² Helmut Müller-Enbergs (2008): *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit. Teil 3: Statistiken*. Berlin: Links Verlag. p. 93.

³³ Ibid. p. 56.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 93.

women which share was slightly higher than the share of their male colleagues.³⁵ These agents were highest category as they were in contact with hostile Western operators (“Feindbekämpfung”), be it either intelligence agencies or political organizations.³⁶ The numbers from Gera draw a realistic overall picture of the functions of women in East German domestic intelligence work. An overview of the agent network of the Main Department VI (Border control and tourism) is somewhat different, thus the Gera number cannot be uncritically generalized.³⁷

The micro-census among women agents in Gera show the tendency which seem to be typical for the MfS, that agents generally committed themselves for a longer period.³⁸ In Gera every fourth women agent operated two to four years, approximately every third for five to ten years, almost every fifth up to 20 years, and half a percent up to 30 years.³⁹ In other words, in more than 75 percent of the cases, the women cooperated at least five years with the State Security providing proof for the argument that the women saw an intrinsic value in the agent work and were devoted to it. Numbers for the Central Main Department VI (Border control and tourism) confirm the impression from Thuringia of a high degree of partner loyalty.⁴⁰

The 898 women agents of the Gera district administration (1989) came from all corners of society. However, their educational background was prevailing under the national average of the GDR, the largest group of 42 percent had left school already after only 8 years and additional 37 percent after 10, leaving only 20 percent of the agents with a high school diploma after 12 years.⁴¹ This must be seen in relation to the high number of girls in the so-called Extended Secondary School (12 years) in the GDR. Already in the 1970’s almost every second girl enjoyed her high school education.⁴² As it was normal in East Germany, almost all (82 percent) of the women had a vocation, seven percent were pensioners, and only one percent were listed as a homemaker or student.⁴³ Almost all of the

³⁵ Helmut Müller-Enbergs (2008): *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit. Teil 3: Statistiken.* Berlin: Chr. Links Verlag, pp. 89 – 97.

³⁶ Enbergs (1996), p. 76.

³⁷ BA: MfS, HA VI Nr. 7: Hauptabteilung VI. AKG: Übersicht zu weiblichen IM der Hauptabteilung VI, 15.10.1985, p. 216-217.

³⁸ Helmut Müller-Enbergs (2014): How successful was the Stasi in the West after all? In: Wladyslaw Bulhak, Thomas Wegener Friis (ed.): *Need to Know. Eastern and Western Perspectives.* Odense: University of Southern Denmark Press, pp. 45-60, here p. 59.

³⁹ The exact numbers are 2-5 years: 25 %, 5-10 years: 35 %. 10-20 years: 17 %, 20-30: 0,5 %. Karell (2008), p. 21.

⁴⁰ In 1985, the numbers for Main Department VI were: until one year: 17 %, 1-2: 46 %, 2-3: 20 %, more than four years. BA: MfS, HA VI. AKG: Übersicht zu weiblichen IM der Hauptabteilung VI, 15.10.1985; MfS, HA VI Nr. 7, p. 218.

⁴¹ Calculation based on number from Karell (2008), p. 33.

⁴² Rainer Geißler, Thomas Meyer (2006): *Die Sozialstruktur Deutschlands Zur gesellschaftlichen Entwicklung mit einer Bilanz zur Vereinigung.* Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, p. 303.

⁴³ Karell (2008), p. 35. For ten percent of the women agents the vocation is unknown.

agents were mothers, barely 16 percent were childless at the registration moment.⁴⁴ 58 Percent of the women were married, nine percent were single or divorced, and a large group of 37 percent were widows.⁴⁵ In the comparable cohort of the Central Main Department VI the numbers were only slightly different.⁴⁶ For both groups, it is striking that the group of women who were not formally in a partnership was sizeable. This underlined the circumstance that agent work next to the double responsibilities of a full-time job and family duties was quite a mouthful when a third dimension of obligations were added. Thus, this choice was more likely made at a later point in life.

A central theme in both scientific and popular work is how women were exploited for operative intimate purposes. This not only fitted the popular stereotype of the women agents but also nourished the fantasy of the readers. In her analysis of the MfS' image of women, Ellmenreich wrote: "Women were recruited who preferable had friendly or intimate contacts to men".⁴⁷ And Schmole even named it the „intimacy frontline“.⁴⁸ Similar images of the "operational bed" can also be found elsewhere, for instance in Uta Falcks analysis of prostitution in the GDR.⁴⁹ However, such descriptions are close to exclusive for women. Sexuality was of course a parameter for the MfS when evaluating a person. It was the aim of the security apparatus to utilize all human weaknesses and preferences for operational purposes, and physical and psychological intimacy are undeniable strong driving forces. Thus, it would have been a gross neglect had the MfS not sought to investigate and register the preferred sexual practices of their agents. However, it was a gender neutral, administrative act, as sexuality was registered on edge notched cards for both men and women. Their highlighting of intimacy in the description of women agents was and is an emphasis of the existing controlling images.

In the analysis of the MfS colonel Hempel described intimacy related issues in relation to the MfS central personal database which has not been handed down in the archives. He referred to categories relating to agent's sexuality like fertility and infertility, male and female impotence (both incapability and unwillingness), deviances, polygamy, sexual abstinence, or laxity.⁵⁰ Hempel's analysis demonstrated the attentiveness of the MfS to questions relating to intimacy and the willingness to implement it into operative psychology. However, the known individual cases of the utilization of

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 38.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 37.

⁴⁶ 38 percent were married, 35 percent single, and only 3 percent were widows.

⁴⁷ Ellmenreich (2206), p. 16.

⁴⁸ Schmole (1996), pp. 518–523; Schmole (2001), p. 17; Schmole (2005), p. 110.

⁴⁹ Uta Falck (1998): VEB Bordell. Geschichte der Prostitution in der DDR. Berlin: Links Verlag.

⁵⁰ BA: MfS, JHS Nr. 21775, Bd. 2, Manfred Hempel: Die Wirkung moralischer Faktoren im Verhalten der Bürger der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zur inoffiziellen Zusammenarbeit mit den Organen des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit. Potsdam 1967, p. 84.

sexuality cannot be generalized to the large group of 29.000 women agents working for the MfS. Furthermore, the field has a fundamental source bias, as sexuality – even though an operational factor – is largely protected from researchers due to privacy concerns. This makes it extremely difficult to conduct case studies which could claim to be representative.

One sociological factor which can be extrapolated from the statistical materials is the age structure. Karell's study of agents in Gera show that at least 22 percent of the women were above 60, five percent above 70, and 1,4 percent even above 81 years.⁵¹ At least for these groups, covering more than every fifth agent it was unlikely that they had been recruited for the „intimacy frontline.“

The study of the Main Department VI (Border control and tourism) offers a more detailed overview of the tasks of the 193 women agents within the main department's area of responsibility in the year 1985. The majority, 56 percent, were generally assigned with so-called who-is-who investigations, 27 percent were “ensuring the inner security within the field of operations”, 18 percent were securing GDR citizen in “socialist countries”, 12 percent were investigating and conducting observation “in the operational area” which was the synonym for the West, respectively eight percent were directly engaged in large operations, either Operational Checks on individuals (OPK, Operative Personenkontrollen) or more complex Operational cases (OV, Operative Vorgänge). 12 agents were tasked with surveillance against GDR citizens, and three percent were assigned to contact persons from the “Operational Area” or dealing with so-called Political Ideological Diversion (PiD) or “Political Illegal Activities” (PuT, Politische Untergrundstätigkeit). Five agents were checking Persons from the „Operational area”, four were investigating alleged crimes, and another four were operating nationwide. The Main Department VI was operating against tourists and other foreigners in the so-called Interhotels which were exclusive resorts for travelers from the West. Here the Main Department VI and its regional branches were assigning so called HwG agents, with “a high frequency change of intercourses” (häufig wechselnder Geschlechtsverkehr).⁵² Thus particular investigations of persons from the operational area may very well include the utilization of sexual favors but it was not automatically an euphemism for this. This was the case for the term „other tasks of relevance to the political and operational work” with which two agents were allotted. The term

⁵¹ Karell (2008), p. 35

⁵²Falck (1998), p. 117; Friederike Pohlmann (2008): Hotel der Spione. Das „Neptun“ Hotel Warnemünde. Schwerin: Die Landesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR. p. 59; Steffi Brünning (2020): Prostitution in der DDR: Eine Untersuchung am Beispiel von Rostock, Berlin, und Leipzig, 1968 bis 1989. Berlin: Be.Bra Verlag. p. 170 212.

indicated a bisexual predistortion of the agent.⁵³ The overall impression of the women agents of the Main Department VI was not of the classical honeytrap as imagined in film and literature but rather of much more mundane operative assignments. The “operational bed” did exist, but it stayed a statistical marginal phenomenon.

Women in Foreign Intelligence

The challenge of recruiting agents in the West was very different than at home. Inside the GDR, the MfS could count on cooperation of the communist power structures, plant directors, human resources managers, and other people in key positions. Political, economic, and educational leaders were natural partner choices when employees or students were secretly evaluated. This resulted in a top-bottom approach where patriarchal power structures were mirrored in the agent statistic. In the West, GDR intelligence needed to seek loopholes in the opponent’s security structure, and thus the MfS was more likely to apply a bottom-up approach.

During the Cold War, the West German Counterintelligence (BfV, Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz) assessed the women’s share among the MfS agents in the West as 15 percent.⁵⁴ The press spokesman of the BfV, Friedrich Ernst Berghoff published this under his alias “Henrik van Bergh”.⁵⁵ His estimate was based on uncovered agents in West Germany and was likely also to be a product of the bias of Western investigation and stereotypes of their opponent. Post-Cold War numbers are significantly higher. Numbers based on the investigation of the Federal Prosecutors offices from the 1990’s land at 22 percent of the 499 criminal investigations.⁵⁶ Statistic based on the 1988 register of the foreign intelligence department of the MfS, the Main Department A (HV A) reach 28 percent women in the network in West Germany, altogether embracing 1.553 agents.⁵⁷ However, not only the HV A ran agents in the West, almost half of the MfS agents in the West were handled by the department of the domestic security apparatus. One of them was the Main Department II

⁵³ BA: MfS, Hauptabteilung VI. AKG: Übersicht zu weiblichen IM der Hauptabteilung VI, 15.10.1985; MfS, HA VI Nr. 7, p. 222.

⁵⁴ Hendrik van Bergh (1965): ABC der Spione. Eine illustrierte Geschichte der Spionage in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland seit 1945. Pfaffenhofen: Iimgau Verlag, p. 82.

⁵⁵ Thomas Grumke, Rudolf van Hüllen (2019): Der Verfassungsschutz. Grundlagen. Gegenwart. Perspektive? Berlin: Verlag Babara Budrich. p. 172.

⁵⁶ Georg Herbstritt (2007): Bundesbürger im Dienst der DDR-Spionage. Eine analytische Studie. Göttingen: Vandenhoe & Ruprecht.

⁵⁷ Helmut Müller-Enbergs (1998): Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit. Teil 2: Anleitungen für die Arbeit mit Agenten, Kundschaftern und Spionen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Berlin: Chr. Links Verlag. p. 152.

(Counterintelligence). Within its networks in West Germany and West Berlin were also 28 percent women based on the year 1972.⁵⁸ In other words, the MfS was more willing to include women in its Western operations than at home.

Based on the statistic sheets of the so-called “Rosenholz”-files which were security copies of the HV A databases acquired by the US in 1993, it is today possible to establish a quite detailed overview of the agents in West Germany.⁵⁹

Category	Number in total	Men	Women	Women share (%)
Assistants to illegal resident	12	1	11	92
Agents safeguarding security	114	29	85	75
Couriers	49	15	34	69
Cover Address	41	14	27	66
Emergency quarters	8	3	5	63
Safehouse keeper	44	21	23	53
Contact Person	79	43	36	46
Agents with specialized tasks	50	30	20	40
Contact point	15	9	6	40
Border agent	45	30	15	33
Investigator	40	28	12	30
Perspective Agent	161	117	44	27
Object Source	447	358	89	20

⁵⁸ BA: MfS, HA II: Einschätzung des Standes und der Qualität der Arbeit mit dem IM/GMS-System, 1.6.1972; MfS, HA II Nr. 22899, p. 5.

⁵⁹ For background on the „Rosenholz acquisition“ see: Thomas Wegener Friis, Helmut Müller-Enbergs (2012): The Rosenholz archives – Myth and reality [Die Rosenholz Akten – Mythen und Realitäten]. In: *Baltic World.*, Nr. 1, pp. 25-29; For a detailed description of the Statistic sheet (Statistibögen), see: Helmut Müller-Enbergs (2007): “Rosenholz”. Eine Quellenkritik. Berlin: BStU. Pp.93-125.

Recruiter II	191	160	31	16
Information Source (Pumping Source)	138	122	16	12
Radio Operator	26	23	3	12
Recruiter I	83	74	7	8
Agent handling responsibilities	25	23	2	8
Illegal Resident	31	31	0	0
	1 599	1 133	466	29

Table 1: Gender balance of different agent categories. (1988)

Equal to the impression inside the GDR, women were primarily found at the bottom of the covert food chain, more often in supportive roles than on the frontline. Symptomatic for the HV A gender bias in this respect was the fact that no woman was given the prestigious category of illegal resident which was a neuralgic position for coordinating agent work in the West. Women were merely the assistants to the resident, and in this case most often the wife.⁶⁰ Several of the categories with a high women participation were functions with no or little actual contact to others, for instance couriers, safehouse keepers, and cover addresses. In the other end of the register were the recruiters who were more exposed agents. They were supposed to have a high degree of contact, a quality apparently not trusted to women in the “operational area”.

Two key categories of agents in the West, were the so-called object sources which were agents in place and the perspective agents which were in an earlier phase on their way in the covert career– in the best-case scenario piloted by the HV A- to become agents in place. Though, they were still a minority in both categories, they consisted out of every fifth or respectively every fourth agent. The agents in place blew the stereotypes about women’s place in the world of secret services. They were fully functioning agents inside Western institutions, some of them very productive in their covert vocation. Among the prominent and productive women agents of HV A were Katryn Burger, the speaker of the Union of Civil Servants, Brigitte Heinrich, reporter of the Berlin based newspaper Taz, the Green member of the European Parliament Ursel Lorenzen, secretary at NATO HQ Rosalie

⁶⁰ Herbstritt (2007), p. 108.

Kunze, secretary at the West German Navy Staff Ulrike Namhaft, researcher at EURATOM Doris Pumphrey, assistant to a Green party member of the Bundestag Erika Reissmann, secretary in the Union of German Refugees from the East (Bund der Vertriebenen) Evelin Schötzki, secretary in the West German Defense Ministry Irene Schultz, secretary of the Federal Minister for Science Ursula Vollert, assistant to the leadership of the Social Democratic party Dagmar Kahlig-Scheffler, as well as Herta and Astrid Willner, both secretaries in the Chancellor's office.⁶¹

The list above reveals, how the MfS has indicated the favorite vocations among its women agents: Secretaries, Students, and Journalists. Among the 466 female agents in 1988, 47 were secretaries, 141 were students, and 74 journalists.⁶² All three groups had the evident advantage that they were much easier accessible both practically and ideologically to women compared to men who had already made a career in the Western system. Furthermore, the secretaries often had direct access to classified material, the journalists were flexible and had access to a broad spectrum of people, and the students constituted the perfect starting point for a long-term double-track, covert, and overt career planning.

Within the group of secretaries, the chief secretary was the most interesting from a practical point of view as they were already used to a self-structured and independent workday. In an operative regard they constituted a large potential source as it was presumed that they had a close and particularly confident relation to their superior, sometimes even acting as their right hand. The experience of the HV A proved that the West Germans were laxer in the handling of secretaries than with the men they were assisting.⁶³ Furthermore, the chief secretary was often able to anticipate the action and reaction of their bosses.

The establishment of the contact and grooming a person to the point of recruitment was a sensible and risky process when carried out in the West, and could last two, three or even more years.⁶⁴ According to training manuals the contact to the secretary should „utilize the typical female behavior

⁶¹ Hubertus Knabe (1999): *Die Unterwanderte Republik: Stasi im Westen*. Munich: Propyläen Verlag. p. 48, 89.; Hubertus Knabe (2001): *Der diskrete Charme der DDR: Stasi und Westmedien*. Munich: Propyläen Verlag. p. 400; Helmut Müller-Enbergs (1998), p. 124, 190, 209; Herbstritt (2007), p. 174, 231, 304, 310; Helmut R. Hammerich (2019): „Stets am Feind!“. *Der militärische Abschirmdienst (MAD) 1956-1990*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. P. 286; Bergh (1965), p. 285-292; Heike Amos (2011): *Vertriebenenverbände im Fadenkreuz. Aktivitäten der DDR-Staatssicherheit 1949 bis 1989*. Berlin: De Gruyter. p. 241; Jürgen Roewer (2008): *Im Visier der Geheimdienste. Deutschland und Russland im Kalten Krieg*. Cologne: Verlag Lübbe. pp. 386-387; Karl Wilhelm Fricke (1982): *Die DDR-Staatssicherheit: Entwicklung, Strukturen, Aktionsfelder*. Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik. p 223.

⁶² Based on the Rosenholz Statistic sheets.

⁶³ Helmut Müller-Enbergs (2021): *Toward a Sociology of Intelligence Agents. The GDR Foreign Intelligence Service as an Example*. In: Enrico Heitzer, Martin Jander, Anetta Kahane, Patrice G. Poutrus (Ed.): *After Auschwitz. The Difficult Legacies of the GDR*, New York: Berghahn Books. pp. 100–114, here 109-110

⁶⁴ Müller-Enbergs (1998), p. 130.

and feelings”.⁶⁵ The gender biased language reflected that the recruitment process was almost exclusively male turf. All agent handlers (Führungsoffiziere) of the HV A as well as their superiors were men, and as shown above the supporting agents were almost all men as well.⁶⁶ The manual suggests: „The development of close friendships and love relations was and is [still] a resilient, stabile, and proven successful basis of an operative cooperation with secretary agents. The realities have yet and again shown that female agents primarily engage with a beloved or sympathetic person and only secondary engage with the course which this person represents. Thus, the prime objective of the recruiter is to be gentle, empathetic, and, at the expense of relatively a lot of time, to relate to the interests and problems of a woman, [he must] “be there for her” and ensure the impression of being recognized as an equally valued as well as beloved partner.”⁶⁷

The target group for such an emotional approach were primarily single women, and the HV A estimated that approximately 30 percent of all secretaries within West German parties and governments were either unmarried or divorced.⁶⁸ In the long-term perspective, the emotional bond could not stand alone, and should be “stabilized” by other motives, for instance ideological sympathy for the GDR, which was the most important motor for the cooperation with most agents. At the end of the existence, the HV A was considered to use more women recruiters to reach this end.⁶⁹ However, examples of a changed modus operandi are not known. The method described above became the unfitting trivialized label “Romeo-cases”. The relationship was primarily a preplanned manipulation and not a love-like enterprise. For the women involved, exposure had dire consequences, not only were they punished by the court, but they also lost their job, as well as the “relationship”.⁷⁰ Between 1949 and 1987, 58 secretaries were exposed by the West German counterintelligence service.⁷¹ The BStU historian Georg Herbstritt’s analysis of 499 agents investigated by the German authorities after the reunification showed a somewhat different picture, as only seven cases could be categorized as “Romeos”. Furthermore, in these cases the HV A did not register the recruitment as “Romeo” or even

⁶⁵ BA: MfS, BV Gera, Abt. XV 282: Schulungsmaterial zu einigen ausgewählten Erkenntnissen und Erfahrungen zur Berufsgruppe der Sekretärinnen in der BRD. 1987. p. 39.

⁶⁶ It has to date not been possible to find a single woman handler within the whole HV A structure.

⁶⁷ BA: MfS, BV Gera, Abt. XV 282: Schulungsmaterial zu einigen ausgewählten Erkenntnissen und Erfahrungen zur Berufsgruppe der Sekretärinnen in der BRD. p. 40.

⁶⁸ Müller-Enbergs (1998), p. 124.

⁶⁹ BA: MfS, BV Gera, Abt. XV 282: Schulungsmaterial zu einigen ausgewählten Erkenntnissen und Erfahrungen zur Berufsgruppe der Sekretärinnen in der BRD. 1987. p. 42.

⁷⁰ Helmut Müller-Enbergs (2014): „Die Hälfte des Himmels“. Frauen im kommunistischen Nachrichtendienst. In: Journal for Intelligence, Propaganda, and Security Studies, Vol. 8., Nr. 2. pp. 18-29, here p. 27.

⁷¹ Bayerisches Staatsministerium des Inneren (1988): Verfassungsschutzbericht Bayern 1987. Munich: Bayerisches Staatsministerium des Inneren., p. 184.

under the category “personal affection” but either as ideological motivated or false flag operations.⁷² In other words, this method was neither as frequent nor was it a specific and preferred East German recruitment strategy. Exploiting human needs or emotions was rather a normal and integrated part of the operational psychology. The notion “Romeo” was largely a Western media product which corresponded very well with public expectations and the controlling images of women in intelligence. A very successful secretary agent who neither fitted to the media stereotypes nor to the cliché HV A manual was the case of Johanna Olbrich aka “Anna” (registration number XV 2873/62). Olbrich did not comply with the stereotype of a single woman ensnared by lurky East German recruiters, but she was a highly professional spy who operated for the HV A in the Federal Republic from 1967 to 1985. The HV A database SIRA which started to register incoming documents from the Early 1970’s, had Olbrich’s name on 492 posts in the database, 394 were registered as original documents. In this way, she proved herself to be the most successful agent of the subdepartment II/2 of the HV A, responsible for intelligence against liberal and nationalist parties in West Germany.⁷³

Olbrich (born 1926) worked as a teacher in Saxony until she moved to Berlin in 1960 to start a career in the ministry of education. In 1963 she encountered the MfS and agreed to the use of her apartment as a safe house. Hereby, she joined the rank of the state security as a typical low-ranking agent, however it also brought her into the light of the foreign intelligence services. She was both ideologically motivated and had no family in the making which would hinder her operational use.⁷⁴ She migrated in 1967 to West Germany under the name Sonja Lüneburg. This was a real name of a West Berliner who was in psychiatric treatment in the GDR.⁷⁵ This operative method utilized the linguistic and cultural closeness between Germans in both states which enabled East German spies to slip into the identity of either actual or fictional Westerners. It was a laborious and often time-consuming process which nonetheless helped bringing loyal communist into key positions in the Western institutions and allowed them to operate for years.⁷⁶ In Olbrich’s case it brought her a long career, first as secretary of the liberal member of the Bundestag, William Borm – himself an agent for the HV A, then secretary of the general secretary of the liberal party FDP, Karl-Hermann Flach, then for the federal executive of the FDP, Harald Hofmann, and finally chief secretary of FDP General

⁷² Herbstritt (2007), p. 252.

⁷³ Helmut Müller-Enbergs (2013): Hauptverwaltung A (HV A). Aufgaben – Strukturen – Quellen. Berlin: BStU. p. 65.

⁷⁴ Johanna Olbrich (2003): Ich wurde Sonja Lüneburg. In: Werner Grossman, Markus Wolf: Kundschafter im Westen. Berlin: Editon Ost. pp 9-19, here p. 10.

⁷⁵ See also Oldrich edited biographical notes: Günter Ebert (2013): Die Topagentin. Johanna Olbrich alias Sonja Lüneburg, Berlin 2013.

⁷⁶ Herbstritt (2007), p. 181.

Secretary Martin Bangemann whom she followed as he became minister for economy. In 1985, she was only recalled to the GDR as she risked exposure due to a lost fake ID.⁷⁷

Another woman spy which also did not fit the stereotypes was Gabriele Gast aka “Giesela” aka “Gerald” (XV 378/68).⁷⁸ She must be counted among the important sources of the HV A. Not only was she highly efficient, alone in the HV A database 7.816 posts could be attributed to her case,⁷⁹ but her position as senior official in the West German Intelligence Service BND allowed both the MfS and the KGB a vital insider perspective.⁸⁰ Though her initial contact was built on an emotional tie to her HV A contact, Karl-Heinz, her long service to the Soviet Bloc could not be reduced to a male honeytrap.⁸¹ The Gast case combined several of the HV A favorite methodologies. First, Gast was an independent political person which in the end proved more resilient than a fleeting emotional tie. Secondly, the recruit was done on East German home ground which was not only the safest place to act but also allowed the MfS to use its complete operative apparatus in the preparation. Thirdly, Gast was recruited in 1968 when she was still a student and she did not join the BND until five years later, leaving ample time to prepare her.

Gabriele Gast raised an important issue of agent life, namely the conflict between family life and the priorities of an intelligence service. In 1980, about halfway through her double agent career she adopted a disabled son. The life changing choice forced her to consider her relation to the East German intelligence, because “but now I unplanned was in a situation where the wellbeing of a child of whom I cared [depended on me]”.⁸² It rose the question whether to continue spying when the potential exposure could have devastating effects on a family member who had no share in prior political choices. Gast prioritized to support the Warsaw Pact at a time where she saw world peace at stake due to the NATO’s Double Track decision. The price for this choice both herself and her son had to pay when she was arrested in the fall of 1990 and sentenced to 6 years and 9 months imprisonment.⁸³

⁷⁷ Müller-Enbergs (1998), 151.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 45.

⁷⁹ And these numbers only covers part of her 17 services years as a double inside the BND.

⁸⁰ Müller-Enbergs (2013), 157

⁸¹ Gabriele Gast (1999): *Kundschaftlerin des Friedens 17. Jahre Topspionin der DDR beim BND*. Frankfurt: Eichborn. p. 65.

⁸² Gast (1999), p. 253.

⁸³ Gabriele Gast (2003): *Isolationsfolter*. In: Werner Grossman, Markus Wolf: *Kundschafter im Westen*. Berlin: Edition Ost. pp 260-265.

Conclusion

As it was the case with the Hungarian intelligence, the East German State Security has been both a hierarchical and patriarchal system. The military-like structures and the self-perception left little room for women to make a career within its ranks. Even when it came to the bottom of the “pecking” order of the agents as described by Pető, women were seldomly in abundance. Inside the GDR, not even every fourth agent was a woman which mirrors both male dominance in key positions and the practical problem of the double workload of both job and family. Outside of the GDR the numbers of women were higher, not at least because of the very different recruiting situation. Foreign intelligence in the GDR needed to be more imaginative than their colleagues in the security apparatus. They were forced to seek out the holes in the opponent’s security architecture, and here women, in particular secretaries, journalists, and students were preferred.

The notion of controlling images makes good sense for the East German case. Stereotypes regarding sex, honey traps, or Romeo-spies, have been popular in the public perception of the role of women in intelligence. This dominating idea is largely proved wrong by the East German case both domestically and abroad. The women working for the MfS were not 29.000 Mata Haris. Of course, “the operational bed” existed but it was not a dominating feature. The same turns out in relation to the East German “Romeos”. Not only is the term a bad choice since it romanticizes the attempt to manipulate others on their own risk, but it was also not a dominating operational method. Even alleged known cases “Romeo”-cases were internally not registered as such.

The MfS’ Foreign Intelligence service was gender biased, often with respect to the tasks which were given to women. Also, clichés about women were obviously not unknown to HV A-officers. However, in the West, the apparatus did produce remarkable success among the 20 percent female, sources within Western institutions. And, as colonel Hempel stated in his 1968 study, women were not less inclined to become agents. However, a combination of a bias in the system and practical obstacles kept their number relatively low.

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