

The Germanys Are a Piece of Frosted Cake for Spies

LA
TIMES
August 28, 1985

By JOSEF JOFFE

MUNICH—Last Friday a terse message off the wires of East Germany's official news agency suddenly ended the summer doldrums in Bonn. Bulletin No. 21 had some good news and some bad news. The good news was that West Germany's chief counterspy, Hans Joachim Tiedge, missing since Monday, was neither dead nor dead drunk (as he had often been in the past). The bad news was that he was sober and in East Berlin, asking for "political asylum."

Tiedge is the biggest fish that the East German State Security Service has landed in a generation. His responsibilities in the West German surveillance apparatus ran exceedingly large. He was in charge of operations against East German spies inside the Federal Republic. He also controlled the network of West Germany's agents in the part of the Fatherland that lies beyond the Wall. And he knew plenty about Bonn's counterintelligence work against the other member states of the Warsaw Pact.

What we do not know yet is whether Tiedge was a "mole" or a turncoat. If he was a mole who had burrowed into the intelligence system years ago, it would explain why the West Germans have not scored any notable successes against their Communist compatriots during the last four years. It also would explain why the East Germans could proudly announce that they had caught 168 West German spies during the past 12 months. And it might explain the sudden disappearance of three other suspects shortly before Tiedge's border crossing, one of whom was the personal secretary of Economics Minister Martin Bangemann.

Whether Tiedge was a mole or a traitor, the damage is gargantuan. With his arrival in East Berlin, the West German network in East Germany was "burned" *in toto*. Now, during his debriefing, there are lots of other choice presents that he surely will deliver, such as the ways and means of other Western intelligence services, which he learned in regular top-secret conferences.

The real damage here is political. Not only is Mr. Average Citizen scratching his head in sheer amazement, but also "friendlylies" throughout the Western world—from the CIA to Britain's MI-5—are contemplating with undisguised horror the failings of Bonn's counterspy operation and, no doubt, asking: Whatever happened to the crack Germans who gave us so much trouble during World War II?

Item: For years Tiedge was known as a prodigious guzzler; in his stupor he would leave top-secret materials strewn around

the house; last year he was arrested for drunk driving.

Item: His marriage had been in shambles, and in 1982 his wife died under mysterious circumstances; reportedly she bashed her head against a sink.

Item: He was deeply in hock, borrowing money wherever he could.

All this adds up to the classic profile of a man to be "turned"—spy jargon for somebody who might be recruited as a double agent. Yet only six months ago Heribert Hellenbroich, then the newly appointed head of West Germany's CIA equivalent, shunted aside questions about Tiedge's behavior. These were "private problems," and well known to the authorities.

Why was the man not fired—or at least transferred to the division in charge of paper clips? One of his superiors said: "It was better to take care of him than to boot him out." Tiedge's pride might have been hurt, and then the poor soul might have panicked and defected to East Berlin—precisely where he is now.

Had a John Le Carre imitator tried to pander this plot to a publisher of spy novels, he would have been laughed out of the editor's antechamber. But the real-life plot is deadly serious. "It is a blow," said a former head of West German counterintelligence, "that will take one, two years to repair."

Perhaps more. In 1974 a lesser fish was caught who had been working for Chancellor Willy Brandt; it was the end of Brandt's tenure. Whose heads will roll this time is uncertain. But Tiedge's ultimate superior is Interior Minister Friedrich Zimmermann, a pillar of Chancellor Helmut Kohl's no-longer-so-solid coalition government.

In the end there's not much that can be done to forestall further such disasters. The Federal Republic is a place where life regularly exceeds art, because the country itself is spy heaven. Before the Berlin Wall was built in 1961, 3 million East Germans escaped to the Western half. Today thousands come across legally every year, and they are West German citizens from Day One. They look like West Germans, they speak like West Germans and they live in a free country.

How many of them will re-emerge in East Berlin tomorrow as proud servants of the Peasant and Worker State, back in from the cold? It is easy to be a spy when all you have to do is cross from Germany into Germany, and then into the most liberal political system that the Germans have ever known.

Josef Joffe is the foreign editor of Suddeutsche Zeitung in Munich.