

Chapter 7

Toward a Sociology of Intelligence Agents

The GDR Foreign Intelligence Service as an Example

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The terms “sociology” and “agents” form an odd couple and are rarely lumped together. Is it even possible to link them? A first step in answering this question would be to determine the meaning of each term. After agreeing on terminology, the next step would be to clarify whether conducting empirical social research on a highly invisible group—individuals working in intelligence—is even possible. Once that is confirmed, we can embark on a sociology of agents.

Current State of Research

Even the term “intelligence agent” is problematic. In the German context, an “agent” is a person active in or working for an intelligence service. The term, however, has multiple uses outside the intelligence field, which will be clarified later.

Sociology of Intelligence Agents

Researchers have indeed examined the “sociology of agents.” Linguist Roland Mühlenbernd’s 2013 dissertation, “Signals and the Structure of Soci-

eties" (submitted to the Department of Philosophy at the Eberhard Karls University in Tübingen) examines "agents that constitute the borders between language regions of signaling languages" (Mühlenbernd 2013, 134), not the type of agent discussed here.

While Hans Weber's (1971) dissertation discusses a "sociology of agents," it refers to civil liberties within rural communities in the Zurich region of Switzerland in the eighteenth century.

Jeffrey T. Richelson, David L. Blenkhorn, and Craig S. Fleisher have made relevant contributions. Richelson (1999: 6), an American political scientist, uses the term "sociological intelligence" to describe research conducted by intelligence services on social developments, social systems, and the dynamics between certain social groups to assess the stability of particular regions and their military dispositions. British marketing expert Blenkhorn and Fleischer (2005: 62), an American scholar, acknowledge the utility of these studies for competitive intelligence within the global economy.

Georg Herbstritt (2007) comes closest to what we mean here. Analyzing five hundred indictments made against West German citizens who spied for East Germany, he presents a portrait of a group and examines the social structure of the West German network of "Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter (IM)," or unofficial collaborators. Herbstritt examines their professional qualifications and family relations. One quarter worked in the West German civil service, 11 percent were self-employed, 5 percent were journalists, and 4 percent were homemakers. Since one third of these collaborators had an academic degree, Herbstritt (2007: 115–117) claimed that they were preferred targets. Unfortunately, his pioneering study included only individuals against whom the indictments had a chance of success, which was often influenced by the absence of reliable documents. Therefore, his sample is not representative of the whole.

Sociology of Intelligence Officers

There are studies on full-time intelligence officers in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Jens Gieseke's (2000) dissertation laid the groundwork for this research. Gieseke also investigated the personnel organization and living conditions of full-time employees of the East German Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (MfS). His work sheds light on what he calls the "Chekist milieu" (Gieseke 2000: 544–546)— "Chekists" being the name given to members of the secret services in Soviet satellite states.

Working together, Uwe Krähnke, Matthias Finster, Philipp Reimann, and Anja Zschirpe (2017) produced an in-depth sociological examination of the self-image of full-time employees (*Hauptamtliche Mitarbeiter*) of the

MfS. The authors interviewed former MfS officers; from a total of sixty-three “usable interviews,” their analysis focuses on ten.

This approach was not new: Ariane Riecker, Annett Schwarz, and Dirk Schneider (1990) published ten interviews as early as 1990, when there were hardly any biographical narratives. The same goes for the interview collection by Christina Wilkening (1990), also published that year, and former Hauptamtliche Wanja Abramowski’s (1992: 212–214) “Im Labyrinth der Macht. Innenansichten aus dem Stasi-Apparat,” whose twenty-two-page analysis remains unmatched, especially when it comes to her breakdown of groups within the MfS.

In choosing “prototypical lives,” Krahnke et al. (2017) highlighted cases that contrast with others in terms of “belonging to a particular generation or sex, positions of power, range of activities within the organization, mental dispositions and ways of habit, as well as experiences made after German Reunification.” However, one group is missing from their analysis: the important cohort of Hauptamtlichen who were active in the years 1928 to 1948.

Their study is based on a handful of interviews, which makes it nearly impossible to generalize from the little available knowledge there is. Even the reduced number of Hauptamtlichen, from 91,015 to 78,000, a figure freshly calculated by the authors, does not enhance the size of the representative sample. From the newly calculated figure of 71,000 Hauptamtlichen, 13,000 temporary noncommissioned MfS officers serving three years in the guard division Feliks Dzerzynski were subtracted. According to the authors, including them would not have “made any sense,” since “almost all the examined traits did not apply.” But excluding this subgroup means that an important control was left out of the investigation: the cohort of those who decided not to continue working with the MfS after their term of duty ended. This particular guard division, according to the authors, was “primarily” a recruiting field for the MfS.

In the end, the logic of modern society with its prescribed role expectations crept into the MfS, sublimating the entire personality of agents into the corps when viewed through a sociological lens. This intrusion into the personalities of employees could be easily attributed to the material benefits that MfS agents received, although these were declared to be “intrinsically motivated.” In other words: recruits voluntarily submitted themselves to the MfS, subordinating themselves completely.

At the same time, they understood themselves—as they were required—as “Top Level Comrades.” The “Avantgarde of the Avantgarde” showed an “authoritarian and conformist” attitude, which, truth be told, is generally seen in military organizations, and should not be seen as particular to MfS. Krahnke et al. (2017) also claim their subjects were politi-

cally in line, elevated themselves to heroic stature, and yet were socially isolated. The essence of the study can be summarized in the words of the authors:

When individuals willingly and voluntarily accede to the intrusion of an organization or institution, when they habitually ‘incorporate’ and even dogmatize the respective ideology, the danger lurks that the resulting mentality and lifestyle acquire a life of their own, and appear to be part of the system. This is a gateway to the annihilation of individualism, pluralism, and the allowance for all eventualities—in short, for totalitarianism. (Krähnke et al. 2017: 300)

Christoph Rass (2016) studied the social profile of the Bundesnachrichtendienst BND, the German foreign intelligence service for the period up to 1968. From a total of 11,567 files, he selected 2,689 personnel files and 951 security clearance files for further scrutiny, about a third of the total. He focused on former connections to Nazi organizations and discovered that three-quarters of the 1948 cohort belonged to this group, and in 1965 more than half (Rass 2016: 250–252).

In these studies, comparisons are seldom made between so-called “voluntary” agents who were regularly used in “enemy” countries abroad and “official” full-time intelligence officers. Our focus, the sociology of intelligence agents, has not received sufficient critical attention. So once again we ask, how do we approach this subject?

Nazi Traditions?

For decades, the argument was that the MfS engaged former members of the Nazi secret services within their formal organization and adopted their methods (Untersuchungsausschuss freier Juristen, n.d.; Kappelt 1981: 207–208). Occasionally, there was talk of a “Red Gestapo” (Sagolla 1952). In his 1997 essay “Erst braun, dann rot?,” Gieseke (1997: 129–131) dismantles that theory. From the beginning, the MfS excluded known members of the NSDAP, individuals who were found to be members of law enforcement (“Mitarbeiter der Vollzugsorgane”) and active officers of the Hitler Youth (“aktive Funktionäre der Hitlerjugend”) (Gieseke 1997: 133). Gieseke summarizes his findings:

Within the ranks of the Ministry for State Security there were indeed individual cases of former soldiers of the Wehrmacht, former members of the Hitlerjugend, including those who had joined the NSDAP in the late phase of WWII while very young; there were also cases of former NSDAP members who kept silent about their membership, who were exposed in time, and almost always expelled from the MfS. But not a single case exists

as compelling evidence for the claim that there is unbroken continuity in personnel from the Nazi terror organizations to the Hauptamtlichen of the MfS. There does not even seem to be any corresponding strategy to recruit cadre for the MfS from former organs of the Nazi state. (Giesecke 1997: 147)

The majority of the Hauptamtlichen hired were between twenty-one and twenty-five years old, and were generally from the working class (Giesecke 2000: 11–13.).

For the so-called unofficial network of the MfS, especially the foreign intelligence service—the HV A (Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung)—a different picture emerges. In its ranks, we find a long list of former Nazis: the former police informant Paul Reckzeh, a member of the Gestapo in Saxony; former heads of an SD branch, such as Erwin Rogalsky-Wedekind and Ernst Schwarzwäller; the SS bureaucrat Kurt Harder; chief squad leader (Hauptscharführer) in the SS special task force Erich Mauthe; plus the convicted war criminal August Moritz (Leide 2005: 195–197). The unofficial network of the MfS in West Germany reflected, on the one hand, personal careers of former National Socialists and, on the other, their desire to ensure—by assisting the intelligence efforts of the GDR—that they would not fall victim to the workings of the SED’s relentless intelligence machinery. Historian Henry Leide (2005: 415) concluded, “The NS cadre could easily be put under pressure; they possessed a high degree of social capital which would enable them to infiltrate any enemy environment, and many of them already could call on their professional experience in intelligence work . . . but in truth, the willingness of many to co-operate was grounded in tactical arguments and self-protection.” While there are quite a few examples, these represent just a selection. It is therefore necessary to embed them in a systematic sociology of agents, which is undertaken in the following section.

Definitions

Agent

The term “agent” has various definitions in German. Essentially, it refers to someone who acts, or someone who is given a task to complete. The term encompasses a range that includes the fictive subject in economics, the representative of an agency, an employee at a call center, a lobbyist, a middleman in a business transaction, and a sales representative. These definitions are all linked through the concept of acting on one’s own.

In the present context, however, an “agent” means an actor within the intelligence services who essentially remains unknown or undercover in

his actions in the foreign country where he is active and who attempts to obtain access to relevant information. This agent is often a full-time officer within an intelligence service (Roewer, Schäfer, and Uhl 2003: 18–19). But this does not always apply to everyone, which is demonstrated in the files of the MfS, where “unofficial collaborators” or “*inoffiziellen Mitarbeiter* (IM)” are often discussed.

For decades, the HV A of the MfS relied on the following definition: “Unofficial employees are such persons who are engaged by the Ministry for State Security to work secretly, and who must meet certain criteria in order to carry out their assigned operations and given tasks” (Müller-Enbergs 1998: 14). But this definition offers only an outline of duties; under scrutiny, it becomes quite vague.

Only one segment of the IM matches most of the characteristics outlined in the HV A description of the IM. The definition applies only to IM who have declared themselves willing to carry out assigned operations for the MfS, in written or another binding form, specifying time, date, and locality. Only officers in Special Operations (Offizieren im besonderen Einsatz OibE), full-time informal informants (hauptamtlichen IM HIM), and “volunteers” (ehrenamtliche ID) in the “operational area” are known to have provided an explicit indication of their willingness to work with the MfS. The HV A preferred such a binding commitment, which was often accompanied by a swearing-in ceremony. In practice, however, recruitment to informal cooperation was seen as a multistep process in which the case officer secured a commitment and cemented his relationship to a contact. It was left to the case officer’s discretion to determine when a contact was ready to begin unofficial work for the MfS.

During the recruitment process, assessing information delivered by an IM recruit was only of limited significance since this was considered part of the relationship development process. First, public information was accepted and worthless tidbits were delivered in the hope of receiving valuable information at a later point. To the case officer, this process may have seemed like crossing a threshold, while the supposed IM often saw it as acting on a whim, neither compromising nor committing him to additional work. Among many prospective IM (PIM) were students who were motivated by professional prospects and whose relationship with the case officer was based on trust, without, however, knowing the officer’s real background or intentions, and in spite of receiving no information of substance from the officer.

The HV A definition of an IM left an unanswered question: for whom was the recruit offering to carry out secret operations? Not knowing the identity of the recruiter posed difficulties for the HV A. Certainly, a clear and conscious commitment to work for the MfS was better than the re-

cruit assuming he was working for a Western intelligence service or unofficially for a real or fictional organization, or unwittingly giving away secrets to a trusted confidant. It is not of particular relevance here that those who were recruited under a false flag or cover were filed as IM; they are not to be included among the “peace scouts” (*Kundschafter des Friedens*, a euphemism for GDR spies). More relevant is the fact that from a legal perspective, these individuals cannot be considered IM of the MfS unless evidence shows that the named person knew who his recruiter was.

A commitment to the MfS, declared and then rescinded verbally or through one’s actions, does not constitute membership in the MfS either, since the HV A insisted on accepting and accomplishing various tasks and operations as proof of engagement; thus the documented membership status is often in question (Müller-Enbergs 1998: 14–15).

Sociology

Just as we have seen with the term “agents,” the academic discipline “sociology” can also assume various meanings. In the present context, the focus is on political sociology in the widest sense, a field located between sociology and political science that examines the relationship between politics and society. It considers the prerequisites for a political system and political activity as well as the structure and function of political institutions. Finally, it takes into account political decision-making processes and their implications for society (Pappi 2000: 535–537). How can research on political sociology be linked to the shadowy world of intelligence agents?

Sociology of Intelligence Agents

Rainer Rupp (born 1945) offers one way. While studying economics, he veered to the political left, taking part in demonstrations against the US war in Vietnam. GDR foreign intelligence services saw his potential and approached him from a political angle.

Rupp believed in the concept of bipolarity—a world order of competing systems—and East versus West justified the need for intelligence work. Abandoning plans to become a development worker, he assiduously sought to penetrate NATO headquarters, where he was employed. Operating under the code name “Mosel,” and later as “Topas,” beginning in 1977 he worked in the policy-setting department of the NATO Economic Desk and delivered reams of information to the HV A, a total of 1,064 documents (Eichner and Rehbaum 2013; Müller-Enbergs 2011: 193–194). Rupp knowingly delivered input that helped shape the policy frameworks of the GDR and Warsaw Pact alliance members, including the structure and function of political institutions and decision-making

processes. In the long run, he had an impact on political decision-making and its effects on social structures.

Beyond a doubt, intelligence agents constitute a group in a sociological context, yet because of the confidential nature of their work, their members were not aware of one another. Group members remain unknown, not only to inquiring researchers but also to the states they worked for and against. Given the dearth of empirical sources, it is any wonder that in-depth studies are not available? This prompts the question, what sources are available?

Current Research Resources

Often referred to as “Rosenholz,” a pool of written records from the HV A offers a tool for scrutinizing the sociology of agents. The Rosenholz files are a compilation of statistics for internal use regarding the operational intelligence network in the so-called area of operations. The file contains statistics on individuals, including their professions and assets. Produced in December 1988, it provides details on about two thousand West German citizens. Amendments to this data were carried out by case officers who maintained the files to varying degrees. The files were highly controversial within the HV A, which remained keenly aware, based on collected data, of the danger that its methods would be discovered. While some of the files cannot be seen as reliable, they are currently the best material available to researchers (Müller-Enbergs 2007). The Rosenholz files have an additional advantage; to some extent, they have solved the “agent” problem by including both the IM and “*Kontaktpersonen*.” Beyond Rosenholz, analysis written by the HV A about its operational procedures also sheds light on the matter (Förster 1996, 1997, 1998, 2001).

Sociological Profile of Agents of the HV A (1988)

A person’s social status determines the respect they receive. This may be granted due to outward social characteristics, including their profession, abilities, power, privileges, or wealth. Pierre Bourdieu (1982) calls this economic, cultural, and social capital.

A Profession as Social Capital

Rosenholz contains information on 1,890 unofficial collaborators and contacts of the HV A. For seventy-one unofficial collaborators and contacts, a second profession is reported (see table 7.1). For example, “Alexander” is listed as a journalist and as having a managerial position. The HV A

Table 7.1. Professions of West German IM/KP of the HV A (as of December 1988).¹

Profession	Number (n)	Share in percent
Employees	635	34
Laborers	72	4
Unemployed/Not working	23	1
Trainees	3	0
Civil Servants	158	8
Diplomats	5	0
Managers	133	7
Wives of IM, not working	128	7
Tradesmen	16	1
Housewives	43	2
Journalists	74	4
Artists	10	1
Military	50	3
IT workers	35	2
R+D workers	89	5
Pensioners	106	6
Secretaries	47	2
Self-employed/Professionals	228	12
Students	141	7
Civilian employee within military	27	1

used twenty-two classifications. These were not discrete categories but rather reflected an interest in certain professions. Thus, finding five persons listed as diplomats and civil servants, we must assume that most diplomats were civil servants. Only certain trends in professions can be ascertained, and, as a result, we can conclude that the working class was not a significant intelligence target for the HV A. Only seventy-two individuals (or 4 percent) are classified as laborers or factory workers. Even if an additional twenty-three individuals listed as unemployed or with no occupation are added to this total, only 5 percent in this class carried out intelligence tasks. The majority of recruits for the HV A were company employees; 34 percent were categorized as such. The second largest group were self-employed individuals or professionals, with 12 percent,

followed by 158 civil servants (8 percent). It is thus apparent that the HV A focused mainly on what Bourdieu (1989) called “*la noblesse d’etat*,” the state elite—namely, employees, civil servants, and the legal profession. In a narrower sense, this meant state-employed teachers were counted among civil servants, and commercial traders and sales representatives among professionals and lawyers.

Secretaries

Three targeted professions are especially noteworthy: secretaries, students, and journalists. Forty-seven women were classified as secretaries in the Rosenholz files, while an additional 141 students and seventy-four journalists are listed. Among secretaries, those who captured the most interest in operational terms were chief secretaries, who generally worked independently. They were expected to develop a close relationship with their bosses, becoming their indispensable “right hands.” It has been shown that this close relationship allowed for lax security, thus making it easier to access internal documents. Additionally, they often understood how the boss thought, which enabled them to gauge his reactions or opinions. In the training materials of the HV A, the “exploitation of typical feminine behavior and emotions” was emphasized when establishing contact with this group:

The development of close friendships and love affairs has always been and will continue to be a consistent, stable, and proven successful basis for the operative work with IM secretaries. It has been shown again and again that the female IM first dedicates herself to the person she respects or loves, and only as an afterthought commits herself to the actual task that he brings her. For the recruiter, it is therefore of primary interest that he maintains a cautious, sensitive approach and that he is able to dedicate substantial time to the interests and preoccupations of the woman involved, that “he is there for her,” and gives her a secure sense of being his equal partner, cherished and loved.²

The HV A estimated that 30 percent of secretaries working in party or government structures were single or divorced, thus one can assume that most of the secretaries contacted by the HV A did not have a steady partner. They were targeted by recruiters, and it was assumed that for many IM secretaries, a decisive or “stabilizing” factor was their intimate relationship with their recruiter. Yet additional methods to assure loyalty among female recruits were sought. The increased use of female recruiters was discussed within the HV A.³ Yet there are no known examples of such. A number of spectacular cases involving secretaries, which were grotesquely dubbed “Romeo Traps,” achieved notoriety. From 1949 to 1987, a

total of fifty-eight IM secretaries in West Germany were uncovered by the counterintelligence unit of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bayerisches Staatsministerium des Inneren 1988: 184–185).

Students

In the 1970s in the West, operational approaches sought various ways of getting a foot in the door with students, making use of this group's socioeconomic structure. An internal HV A study concluded that students, hoping for social advancement after their diploma, tended to hide their "lower" social heritage, which would hamper their career chances. Students from lower but up-and-coming classes seemed to realize that, despite the gradual lowering of entry barriers to the "state elite," they would "soon be disappointed." Under these circumstances, students, according to the study, would "quite often" be willing to become enemies of the "government." The HV A was mainly interested in the students who came from blue-collar and lower- and middle-class families of civil servants and employees.⁴

Journalists

As its training materials explain, the HV A considered journalists a group with privileged access to internal information due to their numerous contacts. On the one hand, journalists could cover topics of interest without arousing suspicion. Even their professional attributes and character were to some degree "similar" to those associated with intelligence activities. On the other hand, these journalists were in the "spotlight of imperialist intelligence services" and could readily discern "operative work methods." For these reasons, the HV A saw a need to recruit journalists under a "false flag," and target young adults for the journalistic profession in view of building them up as perspective IMs.⁵

Wealth as Economic Capital

HV A files detailing unofficial collaborators and contact persons also contain data regarding their financial situation, at least at the time of their recruitment. Some 1,890 files offer insight. From the total, 461 (or 24 percent) owned their own house, and an additional 282 owned their own apartment (15 percent), bringing the subset of property owners to 39 percent of the total. But the majority were renters (1,067), and 147 were even listed as subtenants.⁶ This suggests a significant gap in financial assets between unofficial collaborators and contact persons. A hint of this discrepancy can be viewed in table 7.2, where we find the owners of three buses, four

Table 7.2. Economic capital of West German IM/KP der HV A (as of December 1988).⁷

Economic capital	Number (n)	Share in percent
Own car	1.347	71
Renter	1.067	56
House owner	461	24
Owner of apartment	282	15
Subtenant	147	8
Own office	136	7
Weekend property	66	3
Own truck	21	1
Own motorcycle	12	1
Own motorboat	10	1
Own airplane	4	0
Own bus	3	0

airplanes, ten motorboats, and twenty-one trucks. Yet this sample is too limited to provide an overall picture of the social profile of the IMs and contact persons of the HV A. Still, one can say that the middle class was more represented among the ranks of intelligence agents than the working class.

Conclusion

Putting together an odd couple—“sociology” and “agents”—has allowed for empirical research into a largely invisible group, as intelligence agents must be in principle. Beyond the statistical files of the HV A from 1988—and perhaps the survey conducted by Georg Herbstritt that would contribute to building a social profile of GDR intelligence agents—hardly any data is available. It is possible to conclude that the unofficial collaborator network and pool of contact persons of the foreign intelligence unit HV A were largely employees, and that a smaller segment were professionals and self-employed as well as civil servants. It appears that espionage was not a matter for the working class. This conclusion is underscored by the fact that more than a third owned a house or an apartment at the time of their recruitment.

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Notes

1. Multiple answers were given by 1,890 persons.
2. Schulungsmaterial. Einige ausgewählte Erkenntnissen und Erfahrungen zur Berufsgruppe der Sekretärinnen in der BRD, BStU, MfS, BV Gera, Abt. XV 282, 40.
3. *Ibid.*, 39–45.
4. Major Hermann, Schulungsmaterial (Entwurf): Die zielgerichtete Bestimmung und operative Analyse operativ interessierender Personengruppen im Operationsgebiet Westdeutschland. Potsdam 1972, BStU, MfS, BV Gera, Abt. XV 367/6, 49–61; Klaus Rösler, Psychologische Bedingungen der inoffiziellen Arbeit in das und im Operationsgebiet. Potsdam 1972, BStU, MfS, JHS 21819, 55–63.
5. Schulungsmaterial: Einige ausgewählte Erkenntnisse und Erfahrungen zur Berufsgruppe der Journalisten in der BRD. Potsdam 1984, BStU, MfS, BV Gera, Abt. XV 467/4, 46–50; Schulungsmaterial: Aktuelle Erfahrungen und Probleme der Arbeit einiger Dienstseinheiten der Aufklärung des MfS mit der Methode der Abschöpfung. Potsdam 1986, BStU, MfS, BV Gera, Abt. XV 367/4, 20–22.
6. The total is 103 percent, which is likely due to the fact that one individual could possess various items.
7. Multiple answers were given by 1,890 persons.

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