



A group of people in front of the Austrian Embassy, December 1981. Photo: G. Rutkowska (National Digital Archives)

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Spies or diplomats? Counterintelligence of the Polish People's Republic against western embassies in Warsaw

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One of the primary objectives of the special services of the Polish People's Republic was surveilling the intelligence activity of diplomatic facilities. Without doubt, among the embassies of most interest to the communist counterintelligence were the American, British, West German and French facilities.

It is worth stressing, that the materials concerning this issue, gathered in the Institute of National Remembrance's archives (others remain mostly inaccessible), do not really provide a faithful description of the actual espionage activities of diplomats, but rather allow for the reconstruction of a subjective point of view of the Security Service and its methods of work.

They were all under suspicion

Officers of the 2nd Counterintelligence Department of the Ministry of Interior and the "services" units (especially the "B" observation Bureau of the Ministry of Interior) always assumed that every Warsaw diplomatic facility was not only the representation of a given country in Poland, but that it was also the headquarters ("residency") for intelligence operations. In contrast to the Stalin-era, in the years 1956-1989 not every diplomat was automatically thought to be a spy. However, each and every one was under suspicion, although the ministry usually lacked the means and manpower to verify them all. The most general task of the officers of the Security Service in this field was indeed separating the actual espionage activity from the "regular" functioning of the embassies. This task could be described as the most basic goal of every counterintelligence service in history.

At the same time, the communist services realised, at least in theory, how difficult it was to make this separation. The definition of espionage itself was not precise as well. It was assumed that most information gathered by the diplomats came from the so-called "white intelligence", meaning "innocent" conversations with Poles, reading the press, analysing the politicians' speeches. Apart from that, the actual spy activity of the western facilities, easy to define and separate, at least to the knowledge of the Security Service was de facto limited to field trips near military facilities, usually organised by military attachés. Thus, the communist counterintelligence mainly focused on stopping these field trips.

Diplomatic immunities

Interestingly, it seems that the actual spies rarely used Poles for cooperation. The personnel of western embassies, possessing diplomatic status, already had so many immunities and such a wide range of impunity that it could work much safer, more freely and efficient than eventual spies recruited among Poles. The latter usually had less access to secret information.

Additionally, creating intelligence networks at the Polish People's Republic was very dangerous and risky: it is not circumstantial that a definite majority of western agents identified by the Security Service had been recruited abroad. It was much easier and drastically decreased the risk of a cover being blown.

Diplomatic immunities had one more, indisputable value - it made the counterintelligence largely helpless in

light of even clear espionage activities of the diplomats it managed to uncover. Each direct intervention of the Polish services, be it the Citizens' Militia, military or even officers of the security apparatus, into the untouchable life of a foreigner, could lead to an international scandal and worsen political relations with the foreigner's country. Hence, the authorities of the Polish People's Republic, even with evidence of espionage, seldom decided to declare the diplomat in question *persona non grata*. Such a step automatically implicated the same response from the individual's country, which was undesirable for the Polish side.

Passive actions

Thus, Polish counterintelligence services generally tended to limit their actions to passive responses: secret observation, documenting (usually of gossip character) the lives of "figuranci" (meaning invigilated diplomats), illegal opening of non-diplomatic (and sometimes diplomatic) correspondence, bugging apartments and, last but not least, recruiting of secret collaborators from the closest circles of the "victim". Rarely, the counterintelligence decided to perform more difficult manoeuvres like provocations.

The limited resources of the counterintelligence were tied to limited goals. Officers of the 2nd Department and the "B" Bureau of the Ministry of Interior were usually satisfied with gathering compromising materials, revealing the details of the individual's sexual life, his weaknesses or addictions. What is worth adding, these materials, however extensive and meaningful, were barely ever used. In most cases, they were added to the files of a given case without further actions. It is especially characteristic given the fact that eventual blackmail with the use of this type of documents could serve the most desired goal of any counterintelligence service - to recruit a foreign diplomat. In this regard, the Security Service could not pride itself with much success.

The lack of possibility of confronting Polish sources with foreign ones does not allow for the actual recreation of the scope of intelligence activities of western diplomats in "people's" Poland. What is certain, is the fact that diplomats were not always behaving "innocently". It is worth remembering, that the Polish People's Republic was viewed by NATO, right after East Germany, as one of the most important elements of the Soviet strategy under the eastern bloc, East-West relations and the Cold War. Intelligence services of western countries attempted to, as much as possible, establish the locations and equipment of the Soviet Army troops stationed in Poland, not forgetting the Polish army. The matter of nuclear warheads on Polish lands was essential for formulating the strategy of the North Atlantic Alliance.

Foreign diplomats, especially military attachés, played a crucial role in realising these reconnaissance goals. At the same time, Polish counterintelligence did not really have an idea on how to stop them.

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