

Interrogation Nation: Refugees and Spies in Cold War Germany

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In *Interrogation Nation: Refugees and Spies in Cold War Germany*, historian Keith R. Allen analyzes the “overlooked story of refugee screening in West Germany” (p. xv). Building upon his previous German-language study focused on such screening at the Marienfelde Refugee Center in West Berlin (*Befragung - Überprüfung - Kontrolle: die Aufnahme von DDR-Flüchtlingen in West-Berlin bis 1961*, Berlin: Ch. Links, 2013), Allen examines the places, personalities, and practices of refugee screening by the three Western Powers, as well as the German federal government, in West Berlin and throughout West Germany. The topic is particularly timely since, as Allen notes, many of “the screening programs established during the darkest days of the Cold War” (p. xv) continue today, although their targets have shifted. The current political debates about foreign and domestic intelligence activities in Germany, including the issue of refugee screening, echo earlier disputes from the years of the Bonn Republic. The central questions remain: To what extent have citizenship rights and the Federal Republic’s sovereignty been compromised by foreign and domestic intelligence agencies – largely with the consent of the German government – in the name of security?



Allen divides his study into three parts. In Part I, he focuses on “places” – the various sites in occupied West Berlin and western Germany where refugees were interrogated. He sifts through the alphabet soup of acronyms of US, British, French, and eventually West German civilian and military intelligence services and deciphers the cover names of the institutions and locations at which they engaged in screening activities during the Cold War and beyond.

Even the geography of interrogation, Allen demonstrates, was deeply politicized. Perhaps the most straightforward example was the Marienfelde Refugee Center in West Berlin itself, where newcomers from the East received a processing form (*Laufzettel*). Refugees could not leave the facility and begin a new life in the West before the intelligence services at the facility, divided by country, noted their formal approval on the form. The first box on the form and the first floor of the reception center were assigned to the US interrogators at the facility, initially US military intelligence, especially the Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC), and then after 1947, representatives from the newly-created Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as well. If US interrogators considered someone to be a valuable intelligence asset or a potential operative for covert operations in East Germany or in Eastern Europe, they could shunt that person off to various US facilities in West Berlin for further interrogation, or potential preparation for a return to the East. If the US agencies were not interested, the given refugee would proceed to the second floor of the facility, where British military and civilian



intelligence interrogators awaited them. Just like the Americans, they too could send potentially interesting subjects to various facilities in West Berlin for further questioning and potential recruitment. French intelligence services, aware that they stood at the end of the line on the third floor at Marienfelde, would occasionally jump ahead by stamping the forms of potentially valuable intelligence assets with stamps stolen from the US and British interrogators. The Federal Republic's civilian and military intelligence agencies (or their erstwhile predecessors) generally stood at the very end of the queue, with an office outside the main facility. Occasionally the US agencies would bring in their West German counterparts to assist on the first floor, giving them a jump on the British and French, if only in a supporting role vis-à-vis the Americans. Such competition among intelligence agencies over potentially valuable recruits took place not only at Marienfelde and in West Berlin, but in West Germany as well – to the detriment and potential benefit of individual refugees.

This leitmotif of the competition between the various intelligence services continues into Part II of the book, which focuses on “personalities” – or more concretely, the collective personalities of the Western intelligence agencies as reflected in their interrogation and recruitment techniques and their ongoing competition over human sources from the East. Chapter 3, “British Initiators,” illustrates, through a case study of the UK's Scientific and Technical Intelligence Branch (STIB), how the British vied with the much better-funded US agencies for intelligence sources through a focused,



personal approach with potential sources and the establishment of informal networks inside West German politics, science, and culture. In this regard, the STIB achieved some success despite key betrayals and defections from the STIB to the East. Success also came at the cost of tensions with US intelligence services and their newly-established West German counterparts. Chapter 4, “American Liberators,” focuses on those tensions as West German services such as the Federal Office for Constitutional Protection (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, BfV), the Federal Intelligence Service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*, BND), and the Military Counterintelligence Service (*Militärischer Abschirmdienst*, MAD) and their various predecessors worried – especially when the Bundestag and the West Berlin Senate initiated public investigations – about the US deployment of East German and other Eastern European refugees for dangerous and sometimes suicidal intelligence operations and other covert actions behind the Iron Curtain. The recruitment of individuals for such activities, which the Americans often sought to conceal from their West German partners, meant not only the loss of potentially valuable intelligence sources for the Federal Republic, but also the presence of potential double-agents on West German soil – a counter-intelligence challenge and potential security threat to the Federal Republic. These conflicts between the US and West German services demonstrate not only the contested nature of West Germany’s (limited) sovereignty during the Cold War, but also the US spy agencies’ relative neglect of citizenship rights in the Federal Republic.



Chapter 5, “German Administrators,” builds chronologically on the previous chapter by documenting how West German intelligence services increasingly asserted themselves in regard to refugee interrogations, with the blessing of their US counterparts (and to the consternation of the British), in the second half of the 1950s. As the US gave up on its “liberation” policy towards Eastern Europe after 1956, shifting their focus toward the Cold War outside of Central Europe, and started to prioritize signals and electronic over human-source intelligence, the West German services began to gain the upper hand in the questioning of refugees from the East, although cooperation with US services remained close. At the center of the Federal Republic’s efforts stood the Joint Interrogation Centers (JIC; German: *Zweigstellen für Befragungswesen*, BEFRAs), first established in 1958. Although the BND assumed a leading role at the centers, interrogators from all the Western powers were invited to take part in the questioning of migrants, immigrants, and asylum seekers, with US intelligence agencies at the fore. In the wake of East-West détente in the 1970s and 1980s, the JICs expanded their activities to questioning the growing number of travelers to and from the East, in search of useful intelligence information. The ongoing use of the JICs and the continued participation of allied intelligence services in their operation until 2014 became the subject of a parliamentary inquiry after Edward Snowden’s 2013 revelations made US spying in the Federal Republic public (once again).



Part III of the book, “Practices,” focuses on the methods that Western intelligence services used in obtaining human intelligence from refugees and other border-crossers from the East. In Chapter 6, Allen surveys the records of the East German Stasi on these Western interrogation practices, although he stresses that these records – given their ideological and political bias – can be problematic. Nonetheless, purloined records from Western intelligence services and their interrogation centers found in the Stasi archives serve as one of the few available sources for Western practices during the 1970s and 1980s. Chapter 7 highlights the methods that Western agencies used to ply and cajole information out of refugees, asylum seekers, and travelers, including emotional manipulation based on bonds to family, colleagues, friends, and lovers. The assessments of the foreign intelligence agencies often proved decisive in determining whether an individual would be granted asylum in West Germany or sent back to a potentially tragic fate in the East. Mutual accusations among Western agencies of rough practices – leveled especially against US military intelligence agencies – suggest that such interrogations occasionally became violent.

This brings the book back to two of Allen’s major themes – namely, understanding “the plight of those caught in international webs of espionage” and the ways in which “domestic and foreign security officials insinuated themselves into untold numbers of private lives and the substance of postwar democratic rule” (p. xxviii). Based on Allen’s analysis,

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the competition and machinations of the various Western spy agencies seemed, in the end, to have been much ado about nothing. This is especially true when one compares the information gained with the economic and political costs, including the resources devoted to interrogating individuals, the number of successful double-agents who popped up, the potential and real violations of civil and human rights, and the undermining of the Federal Republic's sovereignty. This implicit argument runs through the book, even though Allen concedes that, behind closed doors, the FRG largely accepted such violations of citizenship rights and sovereignty as part of the price to pay for the security guarantee of its US protectors.

Some might argue, in contrast to the picture presented by Allen's analysis, that the security gains for the Federal Republic and the West as a whole justified the occasional breach of sovereignty and citizenship rights. This brings us back to the issue of sources: the finished intelligence based on such mass questioning apparently remains classified and thus unavailable – or, at the very least, it remains unclear within those intelligence reports that have been declassified to what extent they were based on such mass questioning, as opposed to the efforts of individual spies or the fruits of signals intelligence. And furthermore, did this intelligence from interrogations play a role in preventing war and maintaining Western security? This was likely the case during the first half of the 1950s, when other sources regarding the military and political situation in Eastern



Europe, especially electronic and signals intelligence, were largely unavailable.

Allen fleetingly touches upon the potential counter-intelligence – and thus security – gains from refugee screening in the West, but mainly in the context of the baleful plight of individuals sent back to the East, who faced less restrained, often brutal, interrogation at the hands of communist security services. Of course, some of these individuals were likely communist agents, as their Western interrogators suspected, but records relating to such counter-intelligence “successes” remain even more closely guarded than records relating to intelligence activities. Thus, the impression of much ado about nothing remains. Future research based upon the declassification of relevant materials, to the extent that this comes to pass, will relativize and possibly revise this picture.

Despite the aforementioned problems associated with the declassification and availability of records, Allen makes skillful use of the material available in American, British, and German archives. In most chapters, he adopts a case study approach, which is particularly well-suited to the generally unsystematic, boom-or-bust, pattern of declassification of intelligence materials in Western archives. Only the French intelligence agencies, given their extreme resistance to releasing even historic materials, remain largely outside the study’s purview. Nevertheless, Allen critically analyzes relevant



documentation from their Western competitors, along with the Stasi records, to provide insight into at least some of France's screening activities.

To sum up, *Interrogation Nation* presents a compelling analysis of the Western screening of refugees and asylum seekers in the Federal Republic of Germany during the Cold War and beyond. It will remain a standard reference work for the plethora of programs and places associated with such screening, not only for historians, but also for genealogists retracing the path of family members making their way from East to West through a divided Germany during the Cold War. It also represents an important contribution to the history of refugee screening, the activities of Western intelligence agencies, and the Bonn Republic's relationship to the Western powers during the Cold War.

Keith R. Allen, [Interrogation Nation: Refugees and Spies in Cold War Germany](#) (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

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