

“The Needle in the Haystack”: Bulgarian Intelligence in Austria During the Cold War – First Approaches

Dieter Bacher

Abstract: The Bulgarian State Security (Държавна сигурност, DS) within the Bulgarian ministry of the Interior, as main Bulgarian intelligence service during the Cold War, conducted, like the services of the other communist „satellite states“ of the Soviet Union, several activities of foreign intelligence in Central and Western Europe. Mainly responsible for these actions was from 1925 to mid-1950s the “Section B” (security in foreign countries), and from the 1950s on, as Bulgarian state security got a structure similar to the Soviet Committee of State Security (KGB), the first main directorate (foreign intelligence) and the second main directorate (counterintelligence).¹ Some of its actions became infamous already during the Cold War, like for example the assassination of Georgi Markov on Waterloo Bridge in London in 1978.² But besides such spotlights, Bulgarian intelligence activities in Austria during the Cold War are, compared to activities for example by Czechoslovakian or Hungarian services in Austria, almost unexplored.

Key words: State Security; Austria; DS; intelligence; dissidents; economic intelligence; technology

Bulgarian intelligence in Austria – a “missing aspect”

This is even more the case when it comes to Bulgarian intelligence activities in Cold War Austria. Clues for Bulgarian intelligence activities on Austrian soil are very scarce. In early studies on this topic, mainly US-, Czechoslovakian and Hungarian activities are mentioned, Romanian intelligence play a secondary role here. None of these studies reports on Bulgarian activities, both legal and illegal rezidenturas or nets and networks are not mentioned in any form.³ Contemporary studies are not different – they do not mention such Bulgarian activ-

¹ Baev & Grozev 2009, p. 143f.

² On this certain „mokroe delo“ i. e. covert operation, see especially Andrew & Mitrochin 2001, pp. 482–484. As new research attempts in Denmark showed recently, this case has also a connection to Austria, as the suspected Bulgarian operative, Francesco Gullino, took his refuge in close vicinity to Wels in Upper Austria: “Who was the ‘umbrella assassin?’”, 20.3.2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/who-was-the-umbrella-assassin/a-65046085>.

³ See especially Irnberger 1983; Möchel 1997; Kemper 1996; Schmidl (ed.) 2000.

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ities as well.⁴ In the fundamental study of Jordan Baev and Kostadin Grozev on Bulgarian Cold War intelligence and security, Austria is only mentioned once, in the context of nazi labor camps during the Second World War. Cold War Austria is not a topic at all.⁵

Available Western intelligence documentations on Austria from the first half of the Cold War do not change the picture. Declassified US-materials, mainly from the Counterintelligence Corps (CIC, military counterintelligence), available from the 1940s until the late 1960s, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) mainly focus on Czechoslovakian, Soviet and Hungarian activities, mainly in Vienna, Linz and Salzburg.⁶ CIA reports on Bulgarian-Austrian relations deal exclusively with trade negotiations and economic relation between the two states.⁷ Available British materials from Field Security (FS, military security and counterintelligence), Joint Intelligence Bureau (JIB, positive intelligence and counterintelligence against the Soviet Union) and the Intelligence Organization Austria (Intorg, intelligence administration of the British Element of the Allied Commission for Austria, ACA/BE) focusing on Hungarian activities in Austria and intelligence towards Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.⁸ Austrian materials also don't contradict this picture, there are not reports on Bulgarian intelligence activities on Austrian territory available so far.⁹

As a consequence, regarding existing and accessible literature and documentations so far, the search for clues on Bulgarian intelligence activities in Austria during the Cold War has in a way the character of "looking for a needle in a haystack". And it seems not to be a problem of missing or not accessible archival documents. For example, CIC-materials on Austria are available in a huge amount and are especially detailed about Eastern European service's activities here, from overview reports on the general situation in Austria to detailed operational reports on certain positive and counterintelligence activities. As the CIC's operations were mainly focused on Eastern activities, it really makes suspicious that Bulgarian activities are not even mentioned there.

Out of these materials, someone can get the impression that the Bulgarian side was not a relevant counterpart for the CIC, that Bulgarian services were

⁴ See especially Riegler 2019.

⁵ Baev & Grozev 2009.

⁶ See NARA (National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D. C., USA), RG 265 and RG 319 and the materials made available via the CIA E-reading room, 12.2.2023, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/home>.

⁷ CIA E-reading room, 12.2.2023, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/search/site/Bulgaria%20Austria>.

⁸ See especially TNA (The National Archives, London, UK), FO (Foreign Office) 1007 and FO 1020.

⁹ ÖStA/AdR, BMI, Staatspolizei; ÖStA/AdR, BMI, Zentrale Evidenzstelle.

not present in Austria until at least the late 1960s at all, and Bulgarian-Austrian relations were only focusing on economic cooperation.

As seen from the results of historical intelligence studies so far, this even seems plausible. Research on Bulgarian intelligence suggests that, in cooperation with the services of other communist states in coordination with the “big brother”, the MGB/KGB in Moscow, Bulgarian positive intelligence was directed against its two neighboring states and NATO-members, Greece and Turkey,¹⁰ like Czechoslovakian services seemed to be mainly responsible for the Austrian theatre of operations. This argument also fits the picture.

Clues on existing Bulgarian intelligence activities

But these answers and arguments are too simple, there are clues on the presence of Bulgarian intelligence in Austria. As Bulgaria had close economic ties with Austria during the Cold War, the old intelligence saying “There are no friends, only interests” would suggest that there had to be some kind of intelligence activity, at least in the economic field. And there is also another reasons which also would legitimate such activities: an existing community of Bulgarian dissidents. Observing dissident communities abroad was an important task for Eastern intelligence during the whole Cold War, also in Austria. Similar activities by Czechoslovakian and Hungarian services regarding “their” communities are documented.¹¹

Reason enough to take a closer look. One possible approach can of course be Bulgarian materials itself. Many materials from Bulgarian civil and military security and intelligence services were declassified so far – in the first years after 1989, only on a very sporadic and selective basis, but in 1994, the Bulgarian parliament decided that the materials and information concerning the former apparatus of communist state security until 13th October 1991 have not to be considered a state secret anymore. Also based on the work of the “Cold War Research Group Bulgaria”, research in these files are now possible, and much information can be accessed for research purposes.¹²

Research in these materials on intelligence activity in Austria has not been done so far, despite the fact that many materials are already available, both at the archives in Sofia and online. First research attempts in these materials showed that there are clues on Bulgarian intelligence activity in Austria, and they highlight some aspects that fit the picture of economic and “dissident intelligence”. It has to be mentioned that these first attempts to shine some light on this topic

¹⁰ See Baev & Grozev 2009, pp. 175–181.

¹¹ See Bacher 2014, pp. 229–244; and Barath & Bacher 2021.

¹² Baev & Grozev 2009, p. 190f.

are far from representing a complete study – but they may give input and possible direction for further research attempts.

The materials on Austria connected to Bulgarian intelligence activities found so far are scarce but can give some first insights. For example, a report from 31st October 1946 by Bulgarian foreign intelligence can be found, dealing with the post-war situation in Austria, Switzerland, Italy and France. Austria is described on a little bit more than two pages. The report mainly deals with the political, economic and social situation in the country and gives an overview on, from Bulgarian point of view, interesting aspects. It does not deal with Bulgarian intelligence activities itself, but can be seen as the result of Bulgarian positive intelligence on site.

Besides information on post-war reconstruction and social problems, the report states that Austria is already becoming an interesting and relevant economic factor, especially for the countries of Southeastern Europe. One of the main indicators Bulgarian intelligence saw was the “Viennese Fair”, held from 7th to 12th October 1946: “The Viennese Fair from 7th to 12th October had made clear that Austria plays again a role in the economic activities of the Balkan countries.”¹³ Especially in the field of technology, Austrian companies would be of big interest, and the Austrian Schilling as currency would stabilize itself rather quickly.¹⁴ As the economic relations between Austria and Bulgaria developed quickly after the Second World War, it seems understandable that Bulgarian intelligence in Austria did economic intelligence and observed possibilities for relations with Austrian companies.

The second main topic of the report are observations on Bulgarian dissidents, refugees and Bulgarian citizens living on Austrian territory, especially in Vienna. The report describes their living conditions in Austria as rather good, as they would find rather good and “cheap”¹⁵ living conditions in Austria in general. Their activities would influence political and diplomatic positions towards Bulgaria, thus Bulgarian intelligence recommended to keep a close eye on them, to especially observe their contacts to Bulgaria and to other Bulgarian groups abroad and their political and ideological attitude.¹⁶

As it seems, Bulgarian intelligence was well aware of the role Austria played for Bulgarian emigration. First, as a destination, as there was a Bulgarian diaspo-

¹³ CDA, F. 146-B, op. 5, a. e. 773, Report from Bulgarian Intelligence on the Situation in Austria, Switzerland, Italy and France, 31st October 1946, p. 1. The report can also be accessed online in the Wilson Center Digital Archive: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110555>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Baev & Grozev 2009, p. 171.

ra especially in Vienna. But secondly, maybe even more important, as an "entry point" to other Western countries. Many Bulgarians used camps in Austria, for example in Traiskirchen, to migrate to Western Germany. Therefore, Bulgarian intelligence had to keep an eye on them. In 1969 for example, Bulgarian intelligence observed 29 camps refugee camps in Austria which were run by the Red Cross, with a focus on the Traiskirchen transfer camp.¹⁷

That Bulgarian dissidents and refugees in Austria were a topic that obviously kept Bulgarian diplomacy and intelligence occupied during the Cold War can also be seen out of other materials. For example, in preparation of the planned visit of federal chancellor Bruno Kreisky in Sofia from 11th to 14th May 1975, a report was prepared in February before. In this report, it is stated that Austria sends requests of "so called 'humanitarian' character"¹⁸ to Bulgaria repeatedly. The cause is seen in a small group of "political emigrants living in Austria who are anti-Bulgarian and were working in certain institutions which are enemies of our state"¹⁹. Bulgarian intelligence estimated that it would be more likely that chancellor Kreisky would bring up this topic also during his visit in May. If that would be the case, the reaction should be to "request in a delicate manner, that Austria should assist in cessation of these anti-Bulgarian activities of the Bulgarian emigration on its territory."²⁰ And a report from December 1981 mentions that the "Bulgarian diaspora" has, from the view of Bulgarian intelligence, two parts: A "patriotic" and an "enemy" one. The 'patriotic feelings' of Bulgarians abroad should be strengthened, and "enemy emigrants" should be observed very closely, and the "patriotic" part of the Bulgarian society in Vienna should be "isolated" from the actions of the anti-Bulgarian part of the diaspora.²¹

¹⁷ See for example Monisija za razkrivane na dokumentite i za objavjavane na prinadležnost na bl'garski graždani k"m D"ržavna sigurnost i razuznavatelните službi na B'lgarskata narodna armija (ed.) 2019, p. 15 and 19; on the refugee camps in Austria, see especially also documents 61 and 62 in this volume, pp. 322–336; and on Traiskirchen camp, document 63, pp. 337–343.

¹⁸ CDA, F. 1477, op. 31, a. e. 171a; official visit of the federal chancellor of the republic of Austria, Dr. Bruno Kreisky, to the people's republic of Bulgaria, 11th to 14th May 1975. Considerations in connection with the visit of the federal chancellor of the republic of Austria, Dr. Bruno Kreisky, to the to the people's republic of Bulgaria, Sofia, 20th February 1975, pp. 255–261, here pp. 257f. Big thanks to my colleague Anna Steiner for the information on this source.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ CDA, F. 1B, op. 81A, a.e.8, pp. 1–69, draft plan for the embassy of the people's republic of Bulgaria in Austria in the year 1982 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the CK of the BKP, department "foreign policy and international relations", 24.12.1981, p. 9.

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Statements like these cannot prove that intelligence capacities in Austria had the task to observe Bulgarian dissident communities, but it would be a plausible explanation. It seems that the main task was to keep these group under a close watch, to be informed on their activities and capabilities.

The report from October 1946 also mentions some activities of emigrant groups. For example, Bulgarian intelligence came across information on smuggling activities by some Bulgarian refugees in Vienna: "Orders for goods come here, sent over various channels, mainly via [Bulgarians working as] gardeners in Austria and Czechoslovakia, and the goods are then sent to Bulgaria by certain methods of transportation."²² Reading between the lines, it becomes clear that Bulgarian intelligence did not see such developments as a threat, but maybe even as a chance to obtain goods from Austria which would be difficult to obtain via other methods.

An interesting passage of the report can be found at the end of the "Austrian" chapter, where a general estimation of Austria is given: "Summing up, it can be said that Vienna is developing into an international center, with the four [occupation] powers struggling for influence here. It will be very helpful to keep a close eye on this struggle."²³ Bulgarian intelligence estimated at that time, a little more than one year after the end of the Second World War, that Austria would be an important international "place to be" in the years to come. The question on which of the present powers would be able to secure their influence here seemed unsolved at that time, but it seems that Bulgarian intelligence estimated it to be worth to stay vigilant to not miss its chances here. This statement is also raising the question why there are no activities documented in studies on intelligence in Austria so far, like there haven't been any. This report suggests otherwise.

Bulgarian dissident and emigration groups were not the only target for observation in Austria, as the mentioned report from December 1981 shows. It also mentions that the embassy in Vienna would also play an important role in observation of other embassies in Vienna, namely the embassies of the USA, West-Germany, China and Albania. These activities would be coordinated with the intelligence services of the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries here.²⁴ This reference suggests that it should also be possible to gain insights into Bulgarian intelligence activity in Austria via materials from its "socialist brother services" – a possible approach both interesting and possible.

²² CDA, F. 146-B, op. 5, a. e. 773, Report from Bulgarian Intelligence on the Situation in Austria, Switzerland, Italy and France, 31st October 1946, p. 2.

²³ Ibid., p. 3.3

²⁴ CDA, F. 1B, op. 81A, a.e.8, pp. 1-69, draft plan for the embassy of the people's republic of Bulgaria in Austria in the year 1982 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the CK of the BKP, department "foreign policy and international relations", 24.12.1981, p. 9.

"The needle in the haystack". Bulgarian intelligence in Austria during the Cold War

That there was Bulgarian intelligence personnel present for at least a certain time during the Cold War in Austria is shown by another available report. It highlights the situation of Bulgarian human intelligence (HUMINT) activities of the second main directorate (counterintelligence) of State Security DS of the Ministry of the Interior in Austria in the late 1950s. This 6-pages report, issued on 17 June 1959, gives an overview on Bulgarian operatives of "counterintelligence" in several Western states during the last 18 months. The first interesting thing is a table at the beginning, mentioning 11 countries and the number of DS counterintelligence operatives and "trusted contacts" ("Доверителни връзки") being active there at that time.

Austria is among the countries mentioned, with the highest total number of agents mentioned (22), outrunning countries like West Germany (12), Turkey (9), Italy (9), France (6) or Greece (1). Looking on the number of "trusted contacts" in Austria (19), the 2nd main directorate had only more contacts only in France (21), and after Austria, countries like West Germany (12) and Turkey (11) follow.²⁵

Table: Agents and trusted contacts of the 1st to 4th department of the 2nd main directorate DS in Western countries, 1.1.1958 to 15.6.1959²⁶:

Countries with agents sent	Which department sent the agents									
	Dept. I		Dept. II		Dept. III		Dept. IV		Total	
	ag. ¹	d.v. ²	ag.	d.v.	ag.	d.v.	ag.	d.v.	ag.	d.v.
England	1						1		2	
Austria		3			5	2	17	14	22	19
Belgium					3	2		1	3	3
BRD	2	3				3	10	6	12	12
Greece							1	3	1	3
Israel	3							1	3	1
Italy	1				5		3	9	9	9
USA					1				1	
Turkey	1		4	1			4	10	9	11
France	1				4	12	1	9	6	21
Switzerland					3	2			3	2
TOTAL	9	6	4	1	21	21	37	53	71	81

²⁵ CDA, F. 2, op. 1, a. e. 626, Information on Foreign Counterintelligence Agents Network Abroad, 17.6.1959, p. 1. The report can also be accessed online in the Wilson Center Digital Archive: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111424>

²⁶ Based on a table found in *ibid.*, p. 1.

²⁷ „агентур“ – „agent“.

²⁸ „Доверителни връзки“ – „trusted contacts“.

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These numbers show that Austria was, contrary to the mentioned literature and Western sources, an important place for at least Bulgarian counterintelligence. It is surprising that such activities are not documented in available materials of other intelligence services present in Austria. For example, with the years 1958 and 1959 mentioned as this report's "range", it covers a period when US-CIC was still active in Austria, focusing mainly on observation of and defense against Eastern intelligence activities. Many CIC materials from this time are accessible – but none of them mentions Bulgarian activities in Austria, what raises the question why this is the case. Seen from the first Bulgarian documentations analyzed so far, this question cannot be answered – further studies could probably give a clearer picture.

The next question is of course what main tasks these operatives had to follow in Austria. The table can also give some clues on this. The mentioned personnel is categorized by departments of the DS second main directorate - counterintelligence: Most of the personnel was active for the 4th department (operations against traitors of the motherland and prosecution of state crimes, 17 agents, 14 trusted contacts) and the 3rd department (observation of Bulgarian citizens who are suspected of espionage and contact to foreigners, 5 agents, 2 trusted contacts) and. Only a small part of the activities (with 3 trusted contacts, but no own agents on site) was assigned to the 1st department (operations of counterintelligence among diplomats of capitalistic states). For the also mentioned 2nd department (counterintelligence operations among tourists businessmen, transit travelers and other foreigners from capitalistic states with temporary stay on Bulgaria), no personnel was assigned to Austria.²⁹ This statistic is of course only a "snap-shot", giving an idea on only roughly one and a half years, but it shows that, at that time, the main focus of Bulgarian counterintelligence in Austria were their own people, Bulgarian emigrants and dissidents. It was obviously an important task for Bulgarian intelligence to keep an eye on them and their political opposition abroad, because Bulgarian intelligence suspected them of "anti-Bulgarian" activities abroad, mainly in the fields of espionage, treason and unwanted contacts to foreign organizations and intelligence services.

Following the statistics, the following short report gives some further information on various HUMINT activity in the countries mentioned. There are also some interesting references about Austria here. In Austria and in general, the 2nd main directorate DS stated that its agents abroad did good and profes-

²⁹ CDA, F. 2, op. 1, a. e. 626, Information on Foreign Counterintelligence Agents Network Abroad, 17.6.1959, p. 1. The report can also be accessed online in the Wilson Center Digital Archive: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111424>; about the tasks of the mentioned departments of DS Second Main Directorate – Counterintelligence, see Baev & Grozev 2009, 145.

sional work. The DS had managed to transfer them to the countries unseen, as it thought, and "during their stay abroad, there were no unpleasant incidents with the police or intelligence services."³⁰ Also concerning Austria, the 2nd main directorate DS identified only one major issue with its operations abroad: That many agents who worked in foreign legations in Bulgaria were sent abroad by the DS. This had led to mistrust among foreign diplomats in Bulgaria and failure of some operations within the country. Especially the activities of the 3rd department took some major damage because of such operational misconceptions. The solution has to be to leave these agents in Bulgaria and to train other cadres for the operations abroad.³¹ Also, all activities should be coordinated more closely with the 1st main directorate DS (foreign intelligence).³²

Regarding examples of HUMINT activities in Austria, the report mentions two examples: first a trusted contact in Austria with the alias "Draguncheva", who was working for the 3rd department of the 2nd main directorate DS. Her main task was obviously to monitor Bulgarian emigrants and dissidents in Austria, as she reported 10 "traitors of the motherland and non-returnees living in Austria" during that time.³³ The second example shows that some of the agents Bulgarian intelligence sent abroad were obviously not that loyal and working professionally as the report stated at the beginning and were maybe too much influenced by their "capitalistic" surroundings: The report states that an agent with the alias "Pirin" (4th department) caused some problems during his stay in Austria, because he was working "mainly for his personal profit instead of completing the tasks we gave him."³⁴ Such reports are also known from other Eastern intelligence services and their activities in Western countries, when agents used their stay there to gain profits and goods they would not have been able to achieve at home, putting the activities of their own services at risk. As it seems, also Bulgarian intelligence faced similar challenges.

Conclusions

To sum it up, there are hardly no studies or clues on Bulgarian intelligence activities in Austria during the Cold War in German- and English-speaking literature available so far, and also files from corresponding Western services like the US-American CIC do not report anything about such activities. This

³⁰ CDA, F. 2, op. 1, a. e. 626, Information on Foreign Counterintelligence Agents Network Abroad, 17.6.1959, p. 2.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 5f.

³² Ibid., p. 6.

³³ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

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would suggest that Bulgarian services were more or less “not responsible” for the Austrian theater of operations, leaving this place to their Czechoslovakian and Hungarian colleagues. But as a look in some available and accessible documentation on Bulgarian intelligence in the West shows, this estimation cannot be correct. Also Bulgarian intelligence was interested in Austria as a place for intelligence activities, and obviously already pretty early (already about one year after the end of the Second World War, as the early report mentioned shows). The documents found indicate two major operational tasks that, compared to the strategies of other communist intelligence services in Austria, sound plausible: monitoring emigration and dissident societies living in Austria, especially in Vienna, and exploring possible economic cooperations and access to technology via bilateral economic ties. Considering the number of agents and “trusted contacts” in Austria compared to other Western countries mentioned in the stated report for the end of the 1950s, it seems strange that these activities were not noticed by Western services and not perceived in early studies on Austria. But it also shows that it could be worth a try to take a closer look on this topic, especially from the perspective of Bulgarian documentations, to highlight this still missing aspect of Cold War intelligence in Austria.

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Dieter Bacher, Mag.

Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Research on Consequences of War
Institute of History, University of Graz, Austria
dieter.bacher@bik.ac.at