

Oral History Research on the Espionage Past of Cold War Double Agent ‘M’

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Scholars of espionage derive most of their sources from declassified archives of intelligence services and memories of (former) intelligence service employees and agents. As few intelligence archives are declassified, memories of former practitioners are even more important. Our research on the espionage past of Cold War double agent ‘M’ largely relies on his oral history interviews. From the late 1960s until the end of the Cold War, M allegedly spied for the former Dutch Security Service (BVD) and later the American CIA, against the East German Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (commonly known as the ‘Stasi’). Our research proved typical of the challenges oral historians in the field of espionage are confronted with 1) few possibilities to verify personal memories; 2) ethical dilemmas regarding the trade-off between academic freedom on the one hand, and attempts of the research subject to influence research methods on the other; 3) (un)intentional factually inaccurate memories.

FEW POSSIBILITIES TO VERIFY PERSONAL MEMORIES

Our research question was tailored to our large dependence on M’s memories and the few – though some important – possibilities to verify his recollections. We analysed the nature of the relationship between M and his contact persons (‘handlers’) of the three different services. We concluded that agents, who operate in a threatening environment, require a reciprocal, affect-based relationship with their handlers, involving trust and gratitude, rather than just a negotiated relationship based

on (financial) arrangements. Our findings resulted in an article publication and media attention.¹

In this initial stage of our research, we filed several requests with the Dutch security and intelligence service AIVD (the legal successor to the BVD) to receive a copy of M's file or any information on (the profile of) his handlers. However, the service refused our requests. This refusal is in line with the common problems that scholars of espionage history face in their attempts to use archives of intelligence and security services. Even if materials have survived and have not been wilfully destroyed, they are often incomplete and only partly declassified, if at all. The ensuing few possibilities to verify oral history interviews become fewer because potentially useful sources, for example, former service employees and agents, often are not willing to speak or, at best, only anonymously. M himself insisted that we anonymise his name and some of his personal and professional details.

Although, during this initial stage, our oral history research centred on M's subjective perspective, we needed to verify as much as possible the objective events that framed his subjective memories. Based on other sources, we knew that M had long-term relations with the Dutch, American and East German services. We also knew, based on academic publications on espionage history, that some aspects of M's memories, whilst unverifiable, were likely to have happened. For instance, initially, we doubted the factual accuracy of M's recollection of his meeting with Markus Wolf, the renowned head of the foreign intelligence branch of the Stasi. However, from academic literature, we knew that Wolf had the habit of personally meeting some of his high-profile agents. Moreover, M's meticulous consistency regarding certain factual details of his story throughout several of our interviews also strengthened our assumption that specific facts were likely to have happened.

1 Eleni Braat and Ben de Jong, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Precarious State of a Double Agent during the Cold War', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 36, no.1 (2023): 78–108.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

According to M, in the early 2000s he had tried in vain to get access to his Stasi file in Berlin, but he now assumed it had been destroyed around the time of the fall of the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR or East Germany) in 1990. Allegedly he had also unsuccessfully tried to contact his former Stasi handlers. In the summer of 2022, the initial stage of our research was completed, and to the delight of M, our first article was published. In this period, we learned that M's former Stasi handlers were still alive, and that part of his Stasi file was available and accessible. Eager to continue our research, we informed M of the availability of these exciting sources that he had tried to consult in the early 2000s. To our surprise, M implored us not to request his Stasi file and not to get in touch with his former Stasi handlers. He argued that this would put him in physical danger on the part of disgruntled, former East German intelligence officers who, in turn, he said were in touch with former KGB officers.

We were puzzled, for several reasons. First, we thought his fears, even if they were justified in his view, were in fact unrealistic and unfounded. We consulted several fellow intelligence scholars and former intelligence practitioners, who unanimously confirmed our view. Second, we did not understand how this reaction aligned with our extensive interviews with him and his delight with the first publication. We could not think of a reason why the additional sources would put him in danger, in presumed contrast to the article publication and the media attention the article had received. We asked M about this several times, but he repeatedly brushed aside our questions. Third, and most importantly, we were puzzled that our research subject was attempting to influence our research methods so adamantly. Academic freedom relates to, among other things, the choice of research topics, questions, and methods, and the access and use of sources of information. Part of this freedom is professional norms of academic research, such as the need for scholars to *reasonably* consider the interests of their research subjects.² In our interpretation, this reasonable

2 Koninklijke Nederlandse Academie van Wetenschappen (KNAW) (Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences) (2021), *Academische Vrijheid in Nederland. Een begripsanalyse en richtsnoer. (Academic Freedom in the Netherlands. A Concept Analysis and Guideline)*. KNAW, NFWO, NWO, TO2, VH and VSNU (2018), *Nederlandse Gedragscode Wetenschappelijke Integriteit. (Dutch Code of Conduct Academic Integrity)*

consideration assumes that the objections of research subjects or other stakeholders regarding sources and methods need to concern *objectifiable* harm. Alternatively, academic research in general and oral history in particular, may become dependent on the volatile position of those with a direct interest in the research results.

Having considered the above, and in extensive consultation with intelligence scholars, (former) intelligence practitioners and the Ethics Committee of Utrecht University, we decided to request access to M's Stasi file (which is accessible to any researcher), and get in touch with his former Stasi handlers. M's Stasi file was substantial, even though it turned out to be incomplete and only concerned 18 months of the 22 years he allegedly was in touch with the Stasi. We got in touch with one of M's Stasi handlers, who refused to meet us in person, but agreed to an (eventually lengthy) email correspondence to answer our questions.

(UN)INTENTIONAL FACTUALLY INACCURATE MEMORIES

M's memories were fascinating, and so were the additional sources we accessed. Over several sessions of many hours of interviews, M had told us how he was run by the BVD against the Stasi from 1968 through 1980, after which he was handed over to the CIA. In other words, his primary loyalty was to the BVD and subsequently to the CIA while he pretended to be an agent for the Stasi. Paradoxically, his best relationship was with his two East German handlers, who turned out to be agreeable companions and who remained the same throughout the 1970s and 1980s. During his elaborate debriefing sessions with them, mostly in East Berlin, the three of them visited nightclubs and went on other enjoyable outings. M's handlers gave him gifts, expressed interest in his wellbeing, and showed their appreciation abundantly. In early 1990, at the end of the Cold War, the Stasi abruptly broke off contact with him by cancelling a meeting that had been planned in Budapest.

The additional sources we consulted, however incomplete, contradict essential aspects of the story that M shared with us, and they leave many important questions unanswered. For instance, the archival material meticulously described his first meeting with the Stasi and a subsequent debriefing in East Berlin in 1968. It says M took the initiative himself to offer his services to the Stasi, without first having

been approached by the East Germans. This contradicts an important element of his story, according to which he accepted an invitation from East Berlin after having received a fiat from the BVD. His former Stasi handler, after having read our first article, informed us in an elaborate email correspondence that, according to him, basic elements of M's story were either completely made up or at the very least wildly exaggerated. The little material we received from Berlin clearly questions not just M's version of the events, but even his basic loyalty to the two Western services that he claims to have worked for during the Cold War. On the other hand, although the Stasi material and the memories of his former Stasi handler are consistent with each other, which increases their reliability, we hesitate to fully rely on them. Like M, his former handler could have had axes to grind. For instance, he could have hard feelings about the fact that his side 'lost' the Cold War, or he could have his own issues with M for reasons that we are not aware of.

When we informed M that we had contacted the Stasi archive and had corresponded with one of his handlers, he expressed his deep displeasure. He was still unwilling or unable to explain why our access to these sources allegedly endangered him, whereas the earlier article publication and the media attention did not, in his view. Moreover, he repeatedly brushed aside our request to react to the sources and showed no interest in their contents. Hence, further cooperation on his part with the follow-up of our research seems unlikely. His reaction makes us wonder why M is so uncomfortable with these additional sources that contradict parts of his story. Does he sincerely believe in his version of the story, has he come to identify with it over the years, or is he intentionally misleading us? And how do we know whether the East German additional sources are more reliable than M's memories?

The world of espionage is commonly compared to a wilderness of mirrors: intelligence agencies and their agents distort reality, create illusions, and reveal multiple perspectives simultaneously. The process of our research shows how scholars of espionage history can become entangled in the wilderness of mirrors they study. This is especially true for scholars who need to rely on oral history methods to verify the events that make up the subjective memories of their research subjects.