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The Redundant Spy

By Axel Bruns

I suppose I can write about this now. Enough time has passed, and the places I will write about have long since receded from the frontline and faded back into obscurity. Back then, it was different – we were, if not exactly shrouded in secrecy, then at least loosely draped in it. We were Eloka, electronic warfare, the first line of defence if the cold war were ever to heat up. Or so they told us.

They told us a lot of things. But first they tested us – physical endurance, mental aptitude, sympathies for the other side. Some they sent to do regular soldiery things, roving around the rugged terrain of the Harz Mountains – those recruits would become our protection squad. Others, like myself, had shown less inclination towards physical exercise, but exhibited talents in languages or maths. So they gave us a crash course in basic Russian: the Warsaw Pact equivalent of the NATO radio alphabet, numbers to one hundred, and basic sentences. Nothing useful in real life, mind you; no ‘Hi, how are you?’ or ‘What time is the next train to Novosibirsk?’, just standard radio chatter. If I ever encounter Russian speakers attempting to strike up a conversation, a simple *Slishu vas otlichna!* will enable me to reassure them that yes, I hear them very well, even if I don’t understand a word they’re saying.

My favourite line from the lessons will always be *On tank stoiť*, though: There is a tank. Had the Red Army ever made known its intentions to finally invade the West by announcing, over the radio and without encryption, that its tanks are now standing by, well, we would have known like *that!* (But of course only if the final offensive against the class enemy had included up to one hundred tanks – any more, and our limited grasp of numbers would have spelt doom for Western Civilisation.)

Thus exhaustively trained, we were divided into smaller groups and shipped off to various locations along the border between the two German states. Here were the radio towers – receiver stations scanning for any signals emanating from Soviet or other military forces operating in East Germany. The towers recorded any suspicious signal and noted its direction of origin, from 0° in the north to 90° in the east to 180° in the south. The western half of the compass was of no interest to them, although in many towers at least one of their many receiver units was usually trained on the operators’ favourite FM station. By the time any Red Army transmissions were picked up from a westerly direction, the game would have been well and truly over already.

If two or more towers picked up the same signal simultaneously, their results could be used to pinpoint the exact origin of the transmission to within a kilometre’s radius or so; the enemy station had to be where the towers’ recorded directional vectors intersected on the map. Such triangulation exercises were of vital importance, we were told; they could tell us if key command posts had shifted position, or which patterns of movement units were practicing during manoeuvres. And, of course, if the Soviet Union did decide to attack the West, we would be the first to hear it. Most likely it would also be the last thing we’d hear about; our

towers were right at the top of any hit list during a land offensive, not so much because of their strategic value, but simply because they were the closest army installations to the border. If it came to this, our fate would be a swift one; as they told us, electronic warfare was not considered regular army business by the Soviets. So, rather than becoming prisoners of war, we would be executed as spies, apparently. Well, always good to have some clarity on such matters.

I was drafted into the army in mid-1989. Three months later, I completed my basic training and began my regular job as a spy. And was it ever regular: the only variation was provided by which of the four shift slots my group was scheduled for in any given week (midnight to 6 am, 6 am to noon, noon to 6 pm, 6 pm to midnight). This would determine which of our no less regular customers we'd be able to note down in the ledgers, too – the high-powered station at 11 am, from 92°; the one at 5 pm from 108°, presumably clocking off for the night; or a whole lot of nothing in the night shifts. After a few weeks on the tower we grew so accustomed to the daily routines of our Red Army colleagues some hundred kilometres east of us that occasionally we'd even tune in and fill out the transmission notification forms before the station came on air. In those days of *perestroika*, the Soviets operated by the book and limited their transmissions to the bare minimum, and it showed. The only challenge for us on the tower became reporting a transmission before one of the other towers picked it up, so that it became our catch and not theirs. There were days when some smartarse further south called one of the regulars before it had begun its daily routine transmission, just so he could claim it as his catch.

Other than this, shift times were filled with an ongoing debate over whose turn it was to shovel copious amounts of army-supply filter coffee into the communal machine; off times were filled with trying to sleep at whatever time of the day we went off duty, or taking the occasional trip to the pathetic excuse for a nightlife this godforsaken borderland region of the Free World had to offer. People looked for find ways to occupy their time – some drank, some smoked pot, some tried to make friends with the locals with a view to getting laid, some just watched x-rated videos or went to the nearby brothel. Some started exploring the area: our barracks occupied a fraction of what had been a much larger WWII army compound, and rumour had it that whole V2 rocket production lines still lay underneath the forest, unexplored. I struck up a friendship with Olli, one of my shift buddies, and one day we stole a couple of 'Military Area – Do Not Enter' signs from a remote corner of the perimeter fence, for the doors of our rooms at home. Olli fancied himself a budding rally driver and rode off his mother's Mazda as he skidded off the old compound's moss-covered concrete tracks.

Between the monotony of barracks life and the tedium of shiftwork, the 20-minute transit from barracks to tower and back became a highlight of my day, a link to normality. Our road took us through one of the nearby towns, and it was good to see people go about their regular business in the day, or drive through the deserted residential streets at night. Here, away from the self-importance of army rules and regulations, everything simply went its was as it always

had; and as days passed and seasons changed, they brought me closer to the end of my compulsory 15-month stint as a soldier. My favourites were the night drives – not only were night shifts relatively easy, but the skeleton size of the night-time crew also meant that we could take the van rather than the bus. I often snatched the front seat, next to Göbel, the driver. On one night, I remember, we encountered the first snow of the season – no more than a thin layer of dusting on the road, so fresh that it hadn't yet been touched by tyre or foot. It was highly localised, too, existing only in a small circle of one or two kilometres around the agricultural plant on the outskirts of town; its ever-present plume of steam and beet sugar smells had subtly altered the local microclimate to produce this early snowfall. I smiled as I imagined the whole country freckled with similar spots, which would eventually grow and cover its entire face. Another, warmer night – maybe earlier that year, or during the summer of 1990 – the full moon was so bright that on an empty stretch of country road Göbel switched off the van's headlights. We had silence on our radio, and we were driving down that moonlight mile.

Other memorable things were afoot during my time in the army – but to us they seemed remote, taking place in that other world outside the barracks gates. Our superiors remained strangely muted; we heard about these events in the TV news and were left to make our own sense of them. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was the guest of honour at the lavish festivities celebrating the 40th anniversary of the German Democratic Republic, the East German state. In his address, he famously chided the country's hard-line Stalinist leaders by saying 'life punishes those who come too late'. Popular celebrations of his visit soon developed into the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig, which demanded that East Germany join its communist brother nations in making democratic changes in the name of *perestroika*. Meanwhile, East German holiday makers in the already liberalised Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia simply refused to return to their homeland, and instead sought refuge in the no-longer-hermetically-sealed West German embassies. Eventually, their safe passage to the West was negotiated.

I can only imagine how our counterparts in the East German radio towers must have felt as these events unfolded around them – or even how the Red Army soldiers reacted to suddenly finding themselves garrisoned amidst such upheavals. West of the border, we watched with a mixture of elation and uncertainty; while we were swept up in the rising tide of long pent-up emotion along with the rest of the population of both German states, for us soldiers the once remote threat of a 'hot' conflict had now become a real possibility. Amongst the political turmoil in East Germany, one trigger-happy commander in the National People's Army or one recalcitrant general of the Soviet Western Corps would have been enough to light the fire in a confrontation which would have involved West German forces very quickly. In those uncertain times, the old story about being executed as spies suddenly seemed much less far-fetched.

It was not that anyone (other than some of the army chiefs and political leaders) directly *opposed* the idea of unification as such – 40 years after the founding of East Germany, the idea simply seemed far-fetched and extremely unlikely. No-one debated whether unification should be a goal, and much less how it should happen. At first, East Germans were asking only for a little more freedom, and we in the West offered some overall encouragement of the ‘good for you’ variety. The idea that walls could come down and borders could open for good was seen as utopian; no plans, no strategies for that eventuality had been developed by the government. Only when the demonstrations in the east intensified, and when political changes there seemed imminent, did we start to consider the consequences – but even at that point unification was a word that was hardly used. Like religion or world peace, it was a nice abstract concept that politicians could invoke in Sunday speeches, but it seemed to have little connection to real, everyday life. Reagan could stand there in Berlin and declaim ‘Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall’, but there was no need to draw up any plans in case the Soviet leader replied ‘Oh, alright then.’ All we saw was that wall, strong, thick, and durable; we couldn’t tell how much it had rotted away from the inside. When it started to crumble, it collapsed quickly, and in the confusion that followed, anything suddenly seemed possible – from peaceful unification to military conflict.

Happily, cooler heads prevailed, and the commanders and generals sat tight and remained quiet. Our radio logs provided us with clear evidence of just how quiet and calm they turned out to be – in the eleven short months between the opening of East Germany’s borders and German unification, we saw only some ten percent of the previous volume of radio transmissions. During that transitional summer of 1990, our receivers were mostly tuned to the audio channels of German TV, following the national team through to its world cup win; much the same probably took place in the towers east of the border. It was time for soldiers on both sides to unplug their radio equipment and go home.

It is perhaps a strange accident of history that the wall came down on the 9th of November 1989, and some commentators noticed the coincidence at the time – of all days, the 9th of November, that already most loaded of dates in German history. On the 9th of November 1918, German revolutionaries proclaimed the first, short-lived republic from the balcony of the Reichstag in Berlin. The 9th of November 1938 saw what became known as the *Reichskristallnacht*, a massive wave of country-wide attacks on Jewish citizens, orchestrated by the Nazi regime. Only twenty years had passed from the first stirring of democracy in Germany to that shameful night, a brutal and unmistakable sign of the failure of Germany and its people to move beyond prejudice and intolerance. The fascists exploited that failure and found willing followers in many Germans. For more than half a century afterwards, the country would continue to suffer as a result of their actions.

On the 9th of November 1989, however, my shift colleagues and I sat in our barracks, watching our TV with incredulity, as if in a dream. We watched second-rate communist party functionary Günter Schabowski make a bumbling announcement, almost forgotten at the end

of a press conference; he delivered it as if announcing a minor change to the opening hours of a public building. East German police had been ordered to allow *free passage across the borders*. We saw the first crowds of revellers spill over into the West at the checkpoints in Berlin. But in contrast to the wild scenes of celebration – the fireworks, the horns blaring as cars passed the turnpikes, the champagne bottles being passed around atop the Berlin wall – we were quiet that night. We were hardly able to process what we were seeing. Whatever was happening seemed to take place in a different country, seemed to affect different people. While the civilians danced on the wall, we soldiers just went to bed to rest for the next shift. If our job as third-rate spies had seemed weird and somewhat laughable to us just a few months ago, now it was a last realm of normalcy in a world which was rapidly in the process of turning upside down.

The next day, our 11 a.m. bus ride to the tower took over an hour, instead of the usual 20 minutes. Even in the backwater towns along our way, the streets were gridlocked with East German cars, their drivers cautiously exploring their new-found freedom of movement by making the 10 km trip across the now open border. For most of them, it was their first time in the West. Car horns beeped and headlights flashed everywhere in celebration. In the midst of this flotilla of tiny East German-made vehicles with their plastic chassis and 1950s design, our huge olive-green army bus must have seemed like a beached whale. Even in spite of their overall elation, it was possible to notice some worried looks from the cars around us, whose occupants, after all, had grown up with plenty of reason not to expect anything positive from anyone in uniform. From our vantage point in this sea of traffic, we too looked down at our nominal enemies with strangely mixed emotions. They couldn't know about our now farcical mission – to spy on people who were suddenly all around us.

On that 10th of November 1989, in that bus, I began to realise the magnitude of the changes that had occurred, and would continue to take place for years to come. No longer was this simply a TV news story; no longer was this something that was happening to other people. History was taking place, literally, all around me: I could wave to it, to them, and they waved back. Then and there, I understood how utterly redundant we would-be spies had just become.