German Left Party leaders pay tribute to deceased spy boss Markus Wolf

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It came as no surprise that a high-ranking delegation of Russian officials jetted to Germany to attend the funeral earlier this month of Markus Wolf, the former spy chief of Stalinist East Germany, who died in his sleep on November 9 at the age of 83.

The Russian delegation was headed by Ambassador Vladimir Kotenev, who praised Wolf at the funeral service as a loyal friend of the Soviet Union. As former head of the KGB in the East German city of Dresden, the current Russian president, Vladimir Putin, was ideally placed to follow and appreciate the work carried out by his German colleague Wolf, who for 34 years had led the foreign intelligence section of the East German Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Ministry of State Security—MfS).

For much of the post-war period, Wolf played a key role, working directly under the head of the MfS (also called the Staatssicherheitsdienst, or Stasi), Erich Mielke, in building up and directing the massive police state apparatus that defended the interests of the East German Stalinist bureaucracy prior to the ignominious collapse of the regime in 1989.

Amongst the estimated 1,500 mourners at the Berlin central cemetery were many leading figures from the East German intelligence and political community. Mielke himself died in 2000 (see "Erich Mielke—the career of a German Stalinist") but his long-time deputy Gerhard Neiber was in attendance, together with Fritz Strelitz, the deputy defence minister of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), as well as Wolf's replacement as head of foreign intelligence, Werner Grossmann.

Prominent figures from the East German cultural bureaucracy also turned out, such as the former deputy culture minister Klaus Höpke and theatre director Manfred Wekwerth, the last president of the East German Academy of Art, who read out a long tribute to the spy.

Political representation at the funeral came almost exclusively from the ranks of the Left Party-PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism). The PDS is the successor party to the Stalinist ruling party of East Germany, the Socialist Unity Party (SED). The presence of prominent representatives of the PDS at the funeral refutes the attempts of this organization on various occasions over the past 17 years to claim that it had distanced itself from the legacy and methods of the East German Stalinist bureaucracy.

The attendance of such leading figures as PDS Chairman and Left Party deputy in the European parliament Lothar Bisky, who gave the main speech at Wolf's grave, and honorary Left Party Chairman Hans Modrow (the last prime minister of the German Democratic Republic prior to German reunification), made clear that the Left Party leadership not only acknowledges its debt, but is prepared to parade its continuity with the repressive dictatorship headed by the SED and defended by the Stasi.

Over the past two years the Left Party-PDS has sought to expand its influence in West Germany through a fusion with the organisation Election Alternative—Labour and Social Justice (WASG), a group dominated by trade union bureaucrats, disillusioned social democrats and a number of petty-bourgeois radical organizations. The attendance at the Wolf funeral of WASG Chairman Klaus Ernst, alongside Bisky and Modrow, makes clear that this organisation has no problem paying tribute to a man who played a crucial role in creating one of the most repressive state police forces in the world.

Markus Wolf came from a cultivated Jewish family which was radicalised by the events in Germany in the first third of the twentieth century and turned to communism. His father, Friedrich Wolf (1888-1953), was a doctor whose experiences as a medical orderly in World War I drew him to the Communist Party. Friedrich Wolf also wrote theatrical works and played an active role in opposing repressive legislation, such as the Weimar Republic's reactionary anti-abortion law. As a Jew and Communist, Friedrich Wolf was forced to flee Germany with his family following the Nazis' rise to power.

Friedrich Wolf was representative of a broad layer of intellectuals and professionals in Germany who were won over to communism in the 1920s and were prepared to make great sacrifices in the struggle for socialism. However, the idealism and deeply-felt anti-fascist sentiments of such men and women were crudely abused and exploited by the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy, which had taken control of the Comintern after Trotsky's expulsion from the Soviet Union and Stalin's decimation of the ranks of the Left Opposition.

As part of the exile community in the Soviet Union, Friedrich Wolf's eldest son, Markus, attended the Comintern Academy in Moscow, where as a youth he made his first fleeting contact with such figures as the first president of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), Wilhelm Pieck, and SED Party Secretary Walter Ulbricht.

Following the dissolution of the Comintern by Stalin in 1943, Markus Wolf was instructed to find work as a radio journalist in Moscow. At the end of the war he was part of the delegation of German Communists who returned to Berlin to take over leadership in the Russian-occupied east of the country at the behest of the Stalinist leadership in Moscow.

Older figures such as the long-time German Communists Ulbricht and Pieck had been selected for their leading posts in the East German Stalinist bureaucracy based on their roles in the 1930s, when they participated in the systemic purging from the exiled German party in Moscow of "dissident elements"—i.e. Trotskyists and other socialist critics of the Stalin regime.

Marcus Wolf was still a youth in the 1930s and played no direct role in such purges, but the witch-hunt of oppositionists constituted the atmosphere within which he was educated. His rapid ascension in the ranks of the East German bureaucracy after the war made clear that he had learned the lessons from that period and enjoyed the trust of his Stalinist masters in Moscow.

Wolf arrived in Berlin on May 27, 1945, at the age of 22, and began work as a journalist. In this capacity he attended the Nuremberg Trials as an observer. The dissident from Stalinism, Wolfgang Leonard, describes a meeting with the young Markus Wolf in 1947. "Misha [Markus]," Leonard writes, "had an even more important function as controller responsible for the principal political broadcasts. He had particularly good relations with very senior Soviet circles, and he occupied a luxurious five-

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room apartment in . . . West Berlin."

In 1947, Leonard had a leading position in the East German Stalinist Central Secretariat and was writing most of the party's political manuals. At Wolf's villa on Lake Glienicke, an hour from Berlin, Leonard discussed with Wolf his plans for a different emphasis in the party programme—in favour of a so-called "German road to socialism." Leonard was promptly rebuffed by Wolf, who rejected Leonard's proposal and declared that the party program had to be rewritten on this point. Wolf told Leonard: "There are higher authorities than your Central Secretariat."

The incident makes clear that the Soviet authorities were convinced they had a trustworthy ally in Markus Wolf—someone who would defend their interests even against dissenting elements inside the East German Stalinist leadership. Wolf was to repay the trust of his Moscow masters with 34 years of loyal service.

Four years on, and acting on Soviet "advice," Ulbricht made Wolf the secret intelligence chief. Two years later, in June 1953, workers took to the streets of Berlin and other East German cities in a popular uprising against the Stalinist bureaucracy. For a number of weeks the fate of the East German ruling clique hung in the balance, and the regime was rescued only through the intervention of Russian tanks to crush the rebellion. The bureaucracy reacted to the uprising with a wave of persecutions and a massive expansion of the Stasi secret police apparatus.

At this point Wolf's foreign intelligence service was merged with the Staatssicherheitsdienst, with Wolf working as deputy to the first head of the Stasi, Ernst Wollweber. "Domestic security" and "secret foreign intelligence" were now two sides of the same coin—the "sword and shield" established to protect the party, repress any independent opposition on the part of the working class and perpetuate the party's hold on power.

In 1957, Wollweber was replaced by his deputy, Erich Mielke, who went on to run the Stasi until the dissolution of the German Democratic Republic. At the same time Wolf's department was renamed the Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung (General Reconnaissance Administration—GRA).

In the course of his career at the head of the GRA, Wolf built up a network of spies comprising 4,000 agents who were able to penetrate deeply into the ranks of various political parties in West Germany as well as international organisations such as NATO. Wolf's greatest coup, which he also describes as his most significant setback, was the rise of his agent, Günter Guillaume, through the ranks of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) to become the top aide to West German Chancellor Willy Brandt. The unmasking of Guillaume as an agent was the trigger that led to Brandt's resignation in 1974.

Wolf regarded Brandt (who had played his own shameful role in the persecution of Trotskyists in the 1930s) as a potential ally who could enhance East Germany's foreign policy influence through an extension of the SPD's so-called "Ostpolitik." Wolf and his masters in the SED Central Committee wanted to keep Brandt in power to further their own interests.

In his memoirs, Wolf writes that he had growing doubts about the course taken by the German Democratic Republic leadership in the 1970s, and his antipathy for his immediate boss, the crude policeman Erich Mielke, is well known. Despite any qualms about the official political leadership, Wolf remained at his post and retired only in the final years of the German Democratic Republic after more than three decades of service.

Wolf played no active role in the mass demonstrations of 1989 that heralded the collapse of the German Democratic Republic, but he was persuaded to speak to the massive crowd which gathered at the Berlin Alexanderplatz on November 4, 1989. Demonstrating his attachment to the police state apparatus he had so assiduously built up, Wolf used his speech to plea for leniency for Stasi officials. His remarks were booed by large sections of the crowd.

Following a brief exile in Moscow at the beginning of the 1990s, Wolf returned to Germany, where the authorities of the now reunified country tried and sentenced him in 1993 to 6 years in prison on charges of "treason." The trial against Wolf was part of a concerted anti-communist campaign organised by leading political circles in West Germany to create the best conditions for the introduction of "western" values—i.e. capitalist market economy values—in the formerly Stalinist east. Wolf conducted a four-year appeal of the court decision, denouncing it as "victors' justice."

In a series of trials after German reunification, West German courts had attempted to use arbitrary interpretations of the law to prosecute prominent East German leaders for activities generally regarded as normal tasks of any state—such as the defence of borders. Wolf was able to point out that the ruthlessness that characterised his own methods had been matched by those employed by leading Western intelligence services.

The German authorities were hardly in a position to dispute this argument. For much of the post-war period their own intelligence services had been run by Reinhard Gehlen, who had been one of Hitler's chief spies. Gehlen had built up his post-war intelligence network using former Nazi contacts and cronies, first in collaboration with the CIA and then in the service of the West German government in Bonn.

The more likely reason for the reduction of Wolf's sentence to two years' parole, however, is that he knew too much—i.e. embarrassing and incriminating facts about the activities of West German politicians in the post-war period. As a result, Wolf was able to stay out of prison.

Wolf was a cultivated man and a very different political animal than the Prussian police thug Mielke. His activities against the West German state in the post-war period were based on a profound understanding of the continuity between post-war German democracy and the relics of the Nazi state. He was fond of quoting literary figures and in his memoirs cites the German playwright Bertold Brecht's play "The Measures Taken" to justify his activities in the German Democratic Republic: "And what baseness would you not commit...?" This, Wolf declares, is "the motto for every aspect of secret intelligence work, which one can typically describe as disinformation."

In the name of the struggle for socialism and the fight against fascism, the East German Stalinists, including Wolf, created a police state machine, the primary task of which was the suppression of any opposition to the ruling clique. While the exploits of Wolf's agents such as Guillaume made the headlines, the GRA under Wolf assisted in disrupting and sabotaging genuine socialist opposition in West Germany to the Stalinist bureaucracy.

His department was an essential component of one of the most repressive state apparatuses in modern history. At the time of the collapse of the Stalinist state in 1989, the Stasi employed an estimated 91,000 full-time employees and 300,000 informants. This amounts to approximately one in fifty East Germans employed to inform and spy on their fellow citizens.

The fact that leading members of the Left Party and the WASG are prepared to doff their hats and pay tribute to such a man must be taken as a warning that they would be prepared to take up Wolf's heritage and adopt similar measures to crush any independent social movement or initiative on the part of the working class.

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