New documents reveal:

1967 police murder of West German student was committed by a Stasi agent

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Forty-two years ago, on June 2, 1967, the student Benno Ohnesorg was shot dead by a West Berlin policeman, Karl-Heinz Kurras, at a demonstration against the visiting Shah of Iran.

The murder of Ohnesorg was a crucial experience for the student movement, which became increasingly radicalised in the face of the unyielding attitude of the state. The killer was immediately taken under the wing of the police, judiciary and right-wing press, led by the media magnate Axel Springer. Two notorious trials were held, and Kurras was acquitted both times.

Now, fresh documents released by an institution charged with exploring the activities of the East German Stalinist security forces—the notorious Stasi—have revealed that at the time of the Ohnesorg murder, Kurras was a secret informant of the Stasi and a member of the ruling East German SED (Socialist Unity Party).

Right-wing forces in Germany are now attempting to use this revelation to revive an old lie—i.e., that the 1968 student movement was entirely a product of the machinations of East European Stalinist secret services. The *Bild-Zeitung* commented on the Kurras revelation as follows: "Mass demos, riots and burning barricades, even the death of Rudi Dutschke, have their origin directly in the sphere of influence and under the remit of Erich Mielke, the Stasi minister of the SED (today the Left Party)."

Such a claim is absurd. First, the death of Ohnesorg was a contributing factor, but not the cause, of the '68 movement, which was not restricted to Germany but was an international phenomenon. The more profound causes of the radicalisation of students were bound up with Germany's unresolved Nazi past, which had left numerous dignitaries of the Third Reich in high social, political and business positions; the Vietnam War; the first deep economic crisis of the post-war period; and the brutality of the German state, which viciously intervened against protesting students on June 2. Even without Ohnesorg's death, a radicalisation of students was inevitable.

Second, there is no evidence that Kurras acted on June 2 on behalf of the Stasi. The Stasi documents examined so far conclude that that the shooting of Ohnesorg was "a very unfortunate accident," and indicate that the agency's collaboration with Kurras was wound down after the killing.

Kurras was known to be a law-and-order fanatic and a weapons collector, who made no secret of his convictions. He hated the students and defends his deed up to the present day.

The revelations concerning Kurras provide no basis for rewriting the history of the '68 movement, as some right-wing commentators have demanded, but they do raise another interesting question: What was the real relationship between the Stasi and the West Berlin police? How was it possible for a right-wing, trigger-happy West Berlin policeman to be at the same time a Stasi informant and SED member? Is it just a bizarre, individual case, or are there more profound political issues at stake?

Before dealing with this question, it is necessary to review the events of June 2, 1967.

The West German Federal Republic, which had been founded less than 20 years previously, maintained friendly relations with the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who came to power in 1953 in a putsch organised by the CIA and the Iranian military. Since then, Pahlavi had maintained a dictatorship notorious for its cruelty. State torture and the murder of oppositionists were its trademarks.

When Pahlavi visited West Berlin on June 2, 1967, exiled Iranians and the German Federation of Socialist Students (SDS) organised a protest demonstration. Prior to the demonstration, the Interior Ministry organised massive security. Indicative of the draconian state response to the protest was the description of police tactics given by police chief Erich Duensing, who declared that it was necessary to squeeze the demonstration "like a sausage" and then "prick it in the middle until it burst apart at the ends."

These tactics were implemented on the day of the protest by plainclothes agents of the Iranian secret service SAVAK, who, under the protection of the German police, commenced beating protesters with wooden staves. As the Shah was amusing himself with his hosts at the opera, the police attacked the mainly peaceful demonstrators without warning. The police response was later described by the well-known journalist Sebastian Haffner as a "cold-bloodedly planned pogrom of a type which remained an exception even in the concentration camps of the Third Reich."

Even the conservative *FAZ* newspaper concluded at the time that the police had "without any serious necessity responded with the planned brutality one associates with newspaper reports from fascist or semi-fascist countries."

It was no coincidence that police chief Duensing had been an Army staff officer in Nazi Germany. The leader of the security police responsible for planning the police deployment, Hans Werner Ulrich, was also a former Army officer with special responsibility during the Second World War for fighting partisans in the Soviet Union, and later in Italy.

A component of the police operation on June 2 was so-called "fox hunts," in which plainclothes police sought out and hunted down alleged "ringleaders." Kurras was attached to one of these snatch squads, and on the day in question encountered the 26-year-old student Benno Ohnesorg in a parking lot.

Ohnesorg was unarmed and had attacked nobody. Three policemen held him while Kurras shot him in the back of the head.

At the court hearing, the judge referred to the "the suspicion that Benno Ohnesorg was still being struck as he lay dead on the ground." The body of the young man, who is said to have called out "Please don't shoot" before he died, was covered in bloody wounds.

For his part, Kurras pleaded self-defence. At a hearing of the Berlin

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regional court in November 1967, Kurras claimed that he had been brutally attacked "by ten or eleven persons" and threatened by "two young men with knives." In response, he maintained, he drew his pistol and "let off one warning shot with his left hand" as he lay on his back. Then, according to Kurras, a struggle broke out with assailants attempting to grab his pistol. He wanted to fire a second warning shot, but in the course of the struggle, "let off the fateful second shot by mistake."

None of the dozens of witnesses present, including a number of policemen, confirmed his story. Nobody heard the warning shot.

Police prevented a doctor from attending to the injured Ohnesorg. The ambulance with his body drove for three quarters of an hour through the city before delivering him—already probably dead—to hospital.

In hospital, the piece of bone with the bullet hole was drilled out of his skull and thrown away. In the meantime, Kurras was able to deliver his police uniform to a cleaning agency and throw away the magazine of his gun. He did not spend a day in custody, was merely suspended from his job for the duration of the trial, and after his acquittals was transferred to internal duties. Kurras suffered no other penalties.

The police trade union lined up behind Kurras and collected 60,000 marks for his defence. None of the policemen involved in the deployment testified against him.

Kurras was never charged with homicide or murder and was acquitted of negligent homicide on two separate occasions because of "lack of evidence."

One day after the shooting, the *Bild* newspaper cynically described Ohnesorg as the "victim of riots organised by political thugs." The *BZ*, which also belonged to the same conservative Springer group, commented: "Whoever is responsible for terror must expect harsh punishment." The *Berliner Morgenpost* wrote that the police had only carried out their "heavy obligation." The entire Springer press supported Kurras and his statement that he acted in "self-defence," while carrying out a hysterical smear campaign against the leftist student movement.

Born in 1927 in East Prussia, the son of a policeman, Karl-Heinz Kurras signed up for military service in 1944. From 1946 onwards, he was imprisoned by Soviet forces in the former Sachsenhausen concentration camp—for allegedly distributing "anti-Soviet propaganda." According to other reports, Kurras had refused to surrender his weapons at the end of the war. Following his release, he joined the West Berlin police in 1950, at the high point of the Cold War.

According to the recently found Stasi documents, he established contact with the central committee of the SED in 1955, declaring he would prefer to work for the police in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). He was then recruited by the Stasi to spy on the West Berlin police. In that function, he quickly became a leading Stasi agent.

He rose inside the West Berlin police apparatus to become part of a team whose job was to "seek out traitors within in our ranks"—i.e., to identify Stasi infiltrators—and even took part in interrogations. He was allowed to take police documents home. In 1962, he submitted a request for membership in the SED, which was accepted in 1964.

Little is known about Kurras's motivation to work for the Stasi and the SED. In both the East and the West, he was considered to be a "gun nut" and an outstanding shot. He won the appreciation of both the Stasi and the West Berlin police for his diligence and punctuality, and was rewarded with money and weapons.

In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Hans Leyendecker writes: "This man, who drank heavily already at an early age and seems to have had a very distorted personality, was, according to acquaintances, a very authoritarian character."

Gerd Koenen describes Kurras in the same newspaper as one of "Mielke's hard men, who spent his entire spare time on the shooting range, where he blew away all the money he had earned in East Berlin in the form of ammunition." Koenen then puts his finger on a crucial point: "In his hatred of the long-haired students and 'trouble makers,' the SED man Kurras would have thought along exactly the same lines as his West Berlin colleagues."

There was little difference between the attitude of the SED and the West German authorities towards the protesting students. The SED was quite prepared to exploit the brutality of the West Berlin police—including Ohnesorg's death—for its own propaganda, but at the same time carefully insulated the East German population from the protests in the West.

Student leader Rudi Dutschke, who originated from East Germany, was under the continual surveillance of the Stasi when he occasionally visited his relatives in the East. Dutschke's own son Marek conjectures today that the Stasi had a role in the assassination attempt made on Dutschke in 1968 by the laborer Josef Bachmann.

Contrary to all anti-communist propaganda, the SED never sought to encourage a communist uprising in the West. The Stalinist rulers in Moscow and East Berlin were much too fearful that a rebellion in the West could spread to their own countries and endanger their dictatorships.

The "Prague Spring" of 1968 confirmed such fears, and the Moscow bureaucracy moved quickly to crush the popular movement with Soviet tanks. The establishment of the German Democratic Republic had been accompanied by repressive measures against the working class, which culminated in the bloody subjugation of the workers' uprising of June 17, 1953.

The SED had absolutely no interest in inciting the student protests in 1968. On the contrary, in an arrangement with the West German Interior Ministry, the SED set up the German Communist Party (DKP) in 1968 to replace the banned KPD. In the years that followed, the DKP regularly defended the Social Democratic government of Willy Brandt and the trade union bureaucracy against any criticism from the left—in particular, from Trotskyists.

In West Berlin, Kurras, who had executed a student being held by three colleagues, was defended and supported by the authorities for 40 years. When he repeated the justification for his actions two years ago to the author Uwe Soukoup, there was no response from the Springer press, the police trade union or the police shooting club of which Kurras is a member. Only after the details of his links to the Stasi leaked out did the police union and shooting association seek to annul his membership. The Berlin Senate is currently reviewing his pension rights, while anti-communist organisations are seeking to indict him on charges of espionage and murder.

Kurras's position between the two fronts of the Cold War is not so bizarre as it seems at first sight. From his point of view, the defence of the capitalist "free world" was entirely compatible with his services for Stalinism. He had no problem reconciling West German anti-communism with Stalinist hostility to any sort of popular oppositional movement.

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