Images of Spies and Counterspies in East German Comics

Published by

Comics of the New Europe: Reflections and Intersections.
Leuven University Press, 2023.
Project MUSE. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.111923.

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Spies and spy rings regularly appeared in comic strips and comic books during the Second World War, however, they seemed to lose their attraction following the defeat of Hitler and fascism—but not for long (Lee 2012). With the advent of the Cold War, stories about spies and counterspies would regain their popularity. This was a truly international phenomenon that swept both capitalist and socialist countries. Even in East Germany (GDR), comics contained a great variety of espionage stories. They pushed social agendas involving war and national liberation movements; some stories even purported to reveal true spy cases. Studying these comics fills a gap between governmental propaganda and everyday life, and provides a wider understanding and awareness of the hidden and open ideological messages that reached and influenced particularly the younger generation during the Cold War.

Using comics in their battle for hearts and minds is not confined to socialist state propaganda alone. Governments have done so for more than a hundred years; cultural, political, and social messages have been spread in and by comic strips and comic books, psychologically targeted at both children and young adults (Manning and Romerstein 61-63; Duncan and Smith; Graham). Since comics reflect the time in which they are created, they can be considered as historical sources, deserving attention from different disciplines, and especially from historians (Scholz 1990; Scholz 2010, "Comics als Quelle;" Scholz 2017).

Surprisingly, we can find comics even in the socialist GDR. But they were called *Bildgeschichten* [picture stories], in order to differentiate them from similar, Western publications. They started as a defensive reaction against Western comics (Chowanetz; Scholz 2008; Jovanovich and Koch). The initiative came from the East German Writers' Association, as a "measure against trashy and obscene literature." It was the well-known writer, Ludwig Renn (1889-1979), who proposed to counter "so-called comics" not only by banning them but also through the "manufacturing of superficially similar

products," which he wanted to call "picture stories." In fact, his idea was a result of his former visit to the People's Republic of China, where he discovered how Chinese picture stories played a central role as pedagogical tools in the service of culture and politics (Scholz 2001, 163-65).

In 1953, the youth magazine *Fröhlich sein und Singen (Frösi)* [Be Happy and Sing] was launched, and contained a significant number of comics. However, more important were two magazines consisting only of comics, so-called *Bilderzeitschriften* [picture newspapers], begun in 1955: *Atze* [Pal] and *Mosaik von Hannes Hegen* [Mosaic by Hannes Hegen]. In its first years, *Atze* was issued as a sister publication of the weekly *Der Junge Pionier* [The Young Scout][1] and was even supervised by the same editorial staff. Until 1990, the official publisher of *Atze* was the Central Council of the Free German Youth (Freie Deutsche Jugend, FDJ), the state youth movement in East Germany. *Mosaik von Hannes Hegen*, by contrast, appeared as a relatively independent publication, and would eventually occupy a special place in the spectrum of East German media (Lehmstedt). It did not take long for the medium in general to be used as an instrument for socialist propaganda. The "educational value" was obvious; in contrast to other publications for children and young adults, comics were simple and quickly consumed. Even as non-mandatory reading, they reached a large readership in East Germany.[2]

By presenting and analyzing image and text examples from East German spy stories, published between 1954 and 1989, I will show how mass media in the GDR, controlled by the communist party and communist youth organisations, used comics as a means of state and party propaganda (Scholz 2001). Examining these comics can lead to insights into how and with what degree of success the socialist ideology resonated in popular culture. This study will concentrate on *Frösi* and *Atze: Frösi* with a monthly circulation of 150,000 in 1954, increasing to 300,000 the following year, and *Atze* with a constant circulation of around 450,000, both produced by the Verlag Junge Welt (Young World Publishers), the publishing arm of the Central Council of the Free German Youth (Grünberg; Kramer).

Spies and Counterspies in the East German Funnies in the 1950s

Following the 1953 June uprising against an intensified process of Sovietisation, the communist regime in the GDR was forced to provide more entertainment for its people and offer alternatives to cultural products from West Germany. This was the motivation behind the publication of new magazines for younger people, including comic magazines. It is not surprising, therefore, that initially humor strips dominated the comics. It did not take long, however, for the medium to be used as an instrument for socialist propaganda (Scholz 2001).

Prior to 1961, the year the Berlin Wall was erected, illegal border traffic and the high number of spy organizations and smuggler rings operating from West Berlin

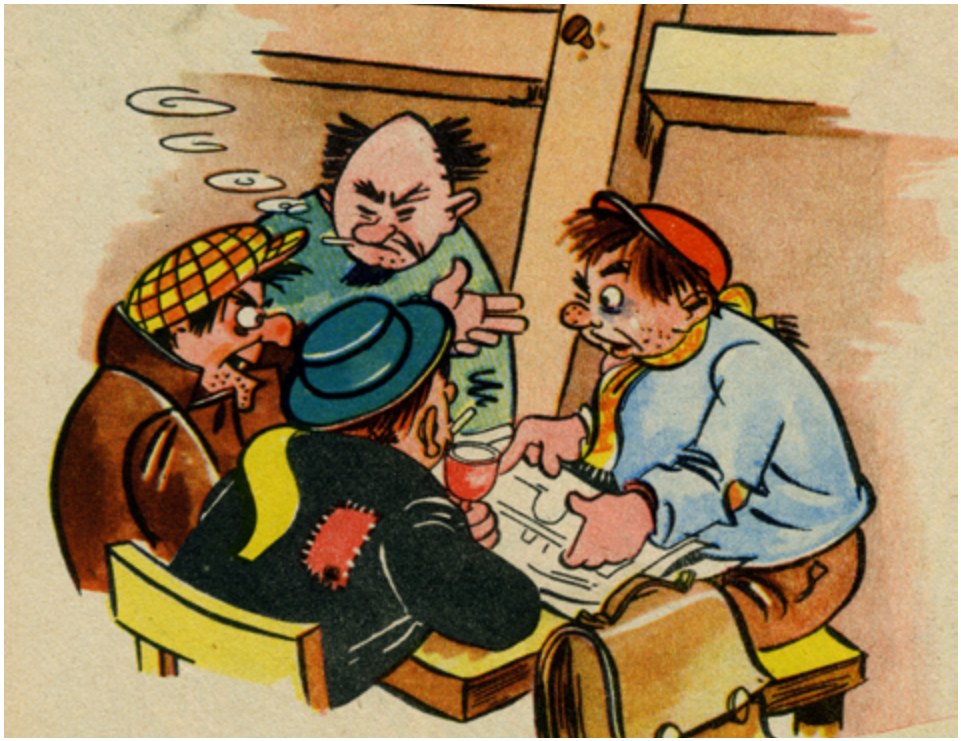

Fig. 1. *Frösi* (7/1955).

were major problems for the East German authorities (Scholz 2009, "Innerdeutsche Grenze"). The first East German adventure strip, published in *Frösi* in 1954, focused on these problems: *Auf den Spuren von Spitznase* [In the Footsteps of Tip Nose].[3] Three children, two boys and a girl, chase smugglers across the sea route through the Baltic Sea. The captain of the ship and the smugglers are arrested. This amusing story, with pictures and rhyming text under the panels, was not much of a "socialist comic," but followed traditional German picture stories that one could still find in West Germany at that time. But this soon changed. In 1955, *Frösi* modified their main comic story *Mäxchen Pfiffig* [Max Smart] from a short gag strip to a longer semi-adventure strip. Still six panels, but now colored and with rhyming text under the panels, the story could extend over several months. The main hero, Mäxchen, created by Richard Hambach (Scholz 2004), is a member of the communist Young Scouts, recognizable by the blue necktie. In his first new adventure story, published over seven months, he and his friends find a briefcase that contains technical drawings of a bridge. The owner must be an agent, concludes Mäxchen, and he takes the briefcase by force, instigating a wild chase. In "Mäxchen Pfiffigs Abenteuer: Der Mann mit der Aktentasche" [Mäxchen Pfiffig's Adventures: The Man with the briefcase],[4] (Fig 1) Mäxchen helps the uniformed "Volkspolizei" (People's Police), the national police of the GDR, arrest

the gang of saboteurs. The following year, Mäxchen Pfiffig's appearance changes dramatically. Mäxchen and his friends act now as black and white drawn figures before a photorealistic colored background. Each panel is combined with a longer narrative text. Mäxchen again hunts industrial spies in "Mäxchen, der Detektiv."[5] Mäxchen and his friends in the Association of Young radio hobbyists hear about a burglary in the nearby VEB factory [People-owned enterprise] "Glashütte." The research department of this socialist factory had developed a special method to produce flexible, unbreakable glass, and industrial espionage is suspected. When the alleged spy and his assistant have a meeting in the back room of a private tavern, the radio hobbyists, all boys, build a monitoring system to track the conversation. With this information, the "Volkspolizei" can catch the not-so-clever spies. Even if the spies' faces were marked by their criminal mentality, in this amusing story, they didn't make a dangerous impression.

Nearly all East German weeklies published comics in the 1950s. The weekly magazine of the GDR "Border police" published the adventure comic "Fritz', Fratz' und Lieschens' Abenteuer an der Grenze" [Fritz, Lieschen, and Fratz's Adventure at the Border] in a women's supplement.[6] As in most of the German picture stories before 1945, the comic had captions and word balloons. Fritz and Lieschen, perky members of the scout organization living near the border with West Germany, meet an unfamiliar man, and they are rightly suspicious of him: he is an illegal *Grenzgänger* [border crosser]. In cooperation with the East German border troops, they chase him down and the troopers arrest him. The caption offers a reassuring and simple conclusion: "Of course, all three were happy about it." And the young scouts, accompanied by their dog, were even rewarded for their help: "Fritz and Lieschen got beautiful books. But the dog got a big sausage".[7] These early East German comics were designed to be funny: the villains were stupid men, intellectually inferior to the children of both genders, and the children were always wearing their blue neckties to indicate their membership in the communist scouts. And the "Volkspolizei" kept everyone safe.

East German Comics in the Shadow of the Berlin Wall

After the Berlin Wall was erected on 13th August 1961, East German comics developed from amusing funnies to serious and more realistic adventure strips. GDR-authorities officially referred to the Wall as the *Antifaschistischer Schutzwall* [Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart] to protect the socialist world against the evils of capitalist countries, NATO countries under the leadership of the United States, and West Germany, which was considered a fascist state. This worldview was perpetuated in propaganda campaigns until the fall of the Wall in 1989. Even comics were employed to convey these messages: young readers were educated to understand that all forms of spying, sabotage, and smuggling were only possible because of the open border. And therefore comic villains grew more realistic and the image of the enemy

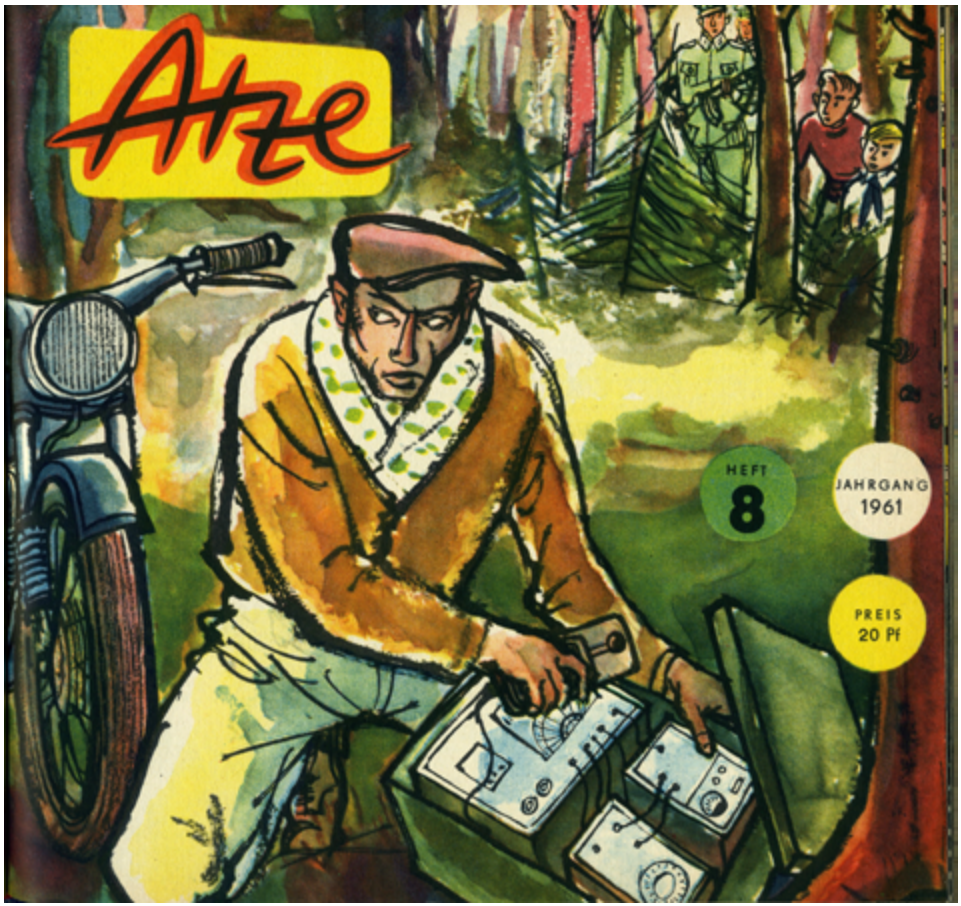

Fig. 2. *Atze* (8/1961).

became increasingly threatening. Instead of smugglers, saboteurs, or "Grenzgänger," the villains in the 1960s were spies, armed and ready to use violence. With this more serious change in tone, girls lost their part as comic heroines. From now on, comics set in a more realistic environment dominated, with stories mixing fact and fiction to articulate political messages.

Two weeks before the Wall was erected, *Atze* published an impressive spy story, this time with fewer panels but accompanied by lengthy captions: "Der Spion. Nach Protokollen unserer Sicherheitsorgane" [The Spy. According to Protocols from our Secret Police].[8] The comic's heroes were young male scouts who became suspicious of a photographer, whom they reported to the police. The "sinister looking" man was arrested and during the interrogation, he admitted that he was spying for the British secret service. In his apartment, the police found capsules with films on which plants, bridges, and stations were documented. And the spy had a Telefunken radio,

a brand "Made in Western Germany." The spy could be arrested thanks to the politically vigilant scouts and the good work of the GDR's "state security" (stasi). The Berlin Wall, then, was justified as a measure to keep out "spies, diversionists, terrorists and smugglers," even before it was constructed (Fig. 2).

In January 1963, the Congress of the East German communist party passed a resolution addressing the "extensive and comprehensive development of socialism," which had consequences for all youth publications as well. The magazine *Atze* underwent a transformation under the ambitious new editor Wolfgang Altenburger, appointed responsible editor in 1963 (Scholz 2010, "Wolfgang Altenburger"). Altenburger joined the publisher Junge Welt in 1956 as a trained Scout leader while he was also studying at Leipzig University. Simultaneously he developed diverse comics projects and wrote most of the comics in *Atze* and the weeklies. Later he summarised his experiences in a Masters thesis (Altenburger). According to Altenburger, socialist comics should convey "pictorially concrete" social developments and their causes, and encourage reflections on them; they should speak to children and awaken their sense of solidarity, justice, partisanship, optimism, respect for work and the worker. Children should be offered "real heroes and role models" whose experiences "do not unfold for the sake of adventure but have specific, real causes." For Altenburger, socialist realism was the best method for representing important and uplifting messages. He interwove the tradition of German picture sheets (Bilderbogen) with the tenets of socialist realism, producing comics rendered in a realistic style. He was also inspired by and borrowed from the example of Chinese picture stories. Their most remarkable stylistic feature was the equal roles attributed to text and image, which supposedly strengthened their political impact. Altenburger's main aim was to use the "single image," with no interaction between words and images. He wanted to break away from "the ancient form of the picture-to-picture story" and attain "a new form" ideally including "both symbolic, abstracted illustrations accentuating the climaxes of the fables as well as an exciting, detailed series of single images." In this manner, he sought to disassociate comics from light entertainment. As a consequence, his new political-historical comics were always excessively pedantic (Altenburger; Scholz 2010, "Wolfgang Altenburger").

Altenburger implemented his ideas in the magazine *Atze*. In January 1967, the magazine changed dramatically, covering now sixteen instead of twelve pages, of which eight were in color. Every number included at least one "political-historical picture story" of six (later eight) pages, written mostly by Altenburger himself. Originally aimed at readers from ages nine to thirteen, the magazine sought to educate children about historical facts and processes. The political-historical story was often followed by a page of factual information, "Atze informs." In fact, these stories were more conditioning their readers than informing them, especially in the case of spy stories.

In 1969, a story about industrial espionage appeared, focusing on arson and human trafficking in Berlin around the 13th of August 1961, the day the Berlin Wall was erected:

"Alarm um Mitternacht" [Alarm at midnight].[9] "West German imperialists and their agent organizations," represented as older balding white men with glasses, threatened the GDR and the "peaceful construction" of socialism by luring thousands of East German professionals, engineers, and physicians to the West. Through promises and threats, these professionals, whose training was paid for with the money of the working people of the GDR, were enticed to betray their "homeland."

The story aptly reflects the increased Cold War tensions following the division of Germany and Berlin. In 1945, the victorious powers divided the city into four sectors, analogous to the occupation zones into which Germany was divided. The sectors of the three Western Allies formed West Berlin, while the Soviet sector formed East Berlin. West Berlin was now surrounded by East German territory, and East Berlin was proclaimed capital of the GDR, a move that was not recognised by western powers. Until August 1961 citizens in Berlin could move freely in both parts of the city. Even though emigration was not legal, many East Germans were escaping to West Berlin due political pressure or for economic reasons, since the economic situation in West Berlin was much better than in the Eastern part of the city. One reason was the burden of war reparations the GDR owed to the Soviet Union after World War II, combined with the massive destruction of industry and lack of assistance, while the Marshall Plan benefitted the people in the West, especially in West Berlin, as a front-line city. At the same time, Berlin was rightly considered the capital of spies worldwide (Murphy, Kondrashev, Bailey).

The *Atze* comic from 1969 did not include a narrative account; instead individual events were spotlighted and commented in extensive captions. One storyline focused on an engineer, Müller, a young man with a nice wife, who received a tempting offer and stole secret documents, but the vigilance of his colleagues resulted in his arrest at the border. In another storyline, the West German General Speidel[10] prepared the troops of the Bundeswehr to invade the GDR after West Berlin-agents instigated riots on behalf of the Bonn government. But the night before 13th August, the *Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse* [Combat Groups of the Working Class] were alerted to secure the border to West Berlin. "Everyone is happy that the agents, smugglers and traitors were stopped," the *Atze* story concludes. And in the regular commentary section, "Atze notes," the reader was provided with more details, a mixture of facts and fiction. According to *Atze*, about eighty-two spy organizations based in West Berlin sought to undermine the GDR. More specifically, their goal was to provoke unrest that would give the "lurking Bundeswehr" an excuse to invade. As the editorial staff darkly concluded, "That would have meant war, but this danger was thwarted on August 13, 1961."

Several comics about the Berlin Wall followed, always representing the alleged subversive activities of West German intelligence agencies acting together with West German media, represented as elderly white men, often with fedora hats and sunglasses. This was the case in the *Atze* story, "Alarm in der Brunnenstrasse" [Alarm in Brunnen Street],[11] which begins:

> August 1961. West German imperialists and their henchmen think the time has come to eliminate our socialist achievements. For years they have prepared the day X by plundering and sabotage. Now they want to recapture our state-owned enterprises and the land of the cooperative farmers. RIAS[12], Springer[13] and the television media are agitating against our party and state leadership to create unrest.

To put an end to these subversive activities, the solution was the "Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart"—the intended message about the purpose of the Wall for East German children.

Political comics in *Atze* could also tell emotional stories more suited to influencing kind-hearted children. A good example is a story published in March 1974 about the friendship between children living near the intra-German border and the border troops: "Hektors' neue Freunde" [Hektor's New Friends].[14] The Border Troops were originally part of the National People's Army (NVA), but they were separated from the NVA at the turn of the year 1973/74, which may have been the reason for publishing this story at that time. The introduction tells the reader that the tale was influenced by true events: an incident on the border not far from a Mecklenburg village the year before. In the story, the Border Troopers and the scouts stand together against extremely dangerous and brutal "border violators," armed and equipped with radios and foreign currency. One of them, disguised as a railwayman, shoots and injures the border guard's dog. The dog was so badly injured that it could longer perform border service. In the end, the dog receives a new home with the scouts. The intended message for young readers was clear: border violators were not refugees, but criminals and spies. Even if they were disguised as good people, they were dangerous; they would even kill your pet and deserved no mercy. In another moralizing *Atze* story from 1985, Americans are depicted as immoral and susceptible to greed. "Following the protocols of the GDR security services," organized criminal groups blackmailed an American soldier in West Berlin. The American and his friends were represented gambling, smoking, and consuming alcohol. The soldier became involved in trafficking in 1974 because of his gambling debts, but the vigilant East German border control stopped him.[15]

CIA: The Main Enemy?

Although the West German intelligence service was frequently depicted as the enemy of the GDR, the real enemy of world peace from *Atze's* point of view was the United States and its civilian foreign intelligence service, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This was not new. In the first years of the Cold War, anti-American propaganda in cartoons and posters were present on large scale even in East Germany. Wilhelm Pieck, the first president of the GDR, called for these anti-American messages months before the

GDR was founded. On a Party Conference in East Berlin in January 1949, he declared, that it was in the "national interest" to drive "US imperialism," which had been "unmasked" in the Soviet Zone as the "legacy of Hitler fascism," out of Europe (Vorsteher 2).

In 1975, the anti-American campaign had a revival when a German translation of a Soviet book about the American intelligence community, particularly the CIA, was published in East Germany. In the introduction, Professor W. A. Tumanow, (who, in 1990s, would become one of the fathers of the new Russian constitution), described the

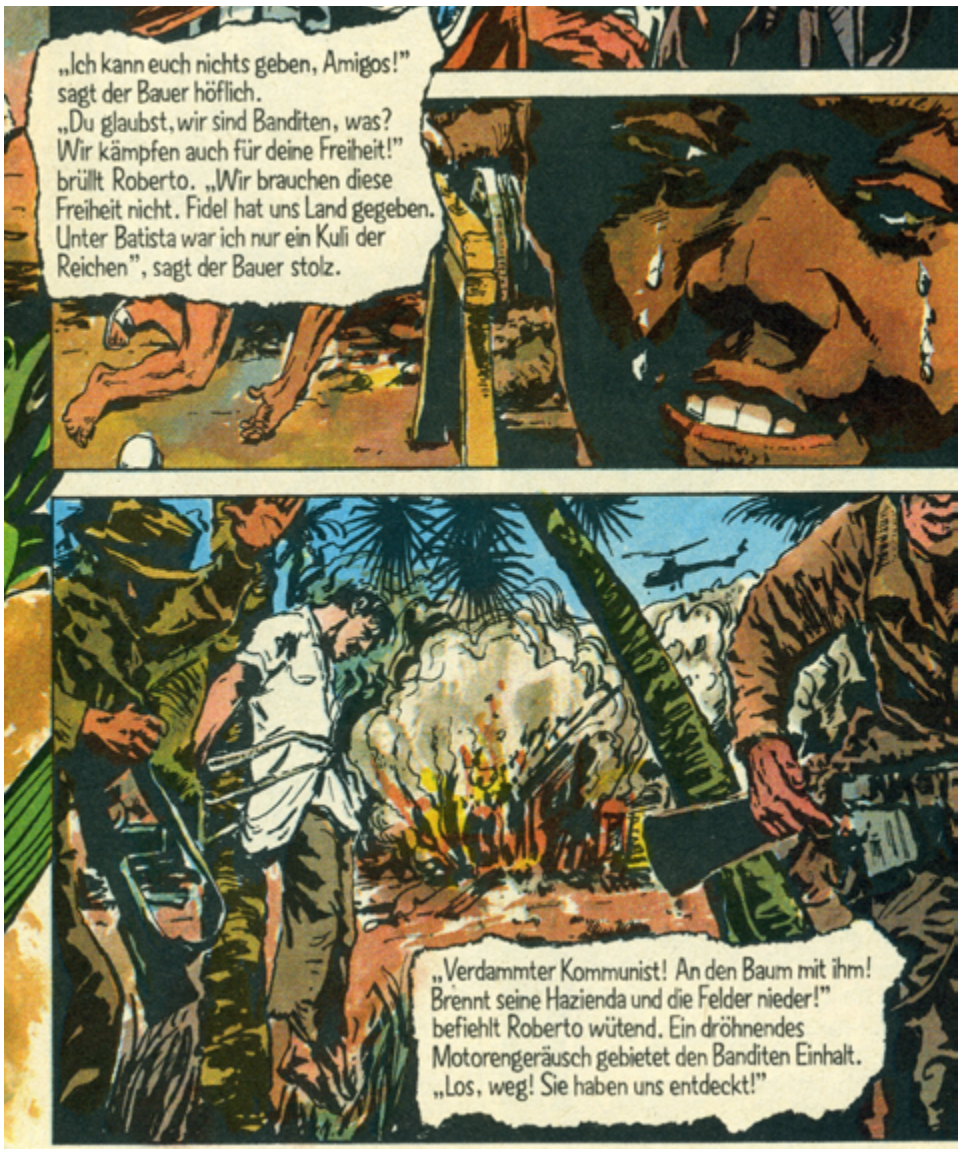

Fig. 3. *Atze* (1/1977).

American intelligence community as a very dangerous enemy, an uncontrollable power "that posed a great danger to both the democratic traditions of the American people themselves and to the democratic, progressive movements in many areas of the world" *(Geheimnisse* 10). After this point, many *Atze* comics accused the CIA of subversive activities against independence movements all over the world.

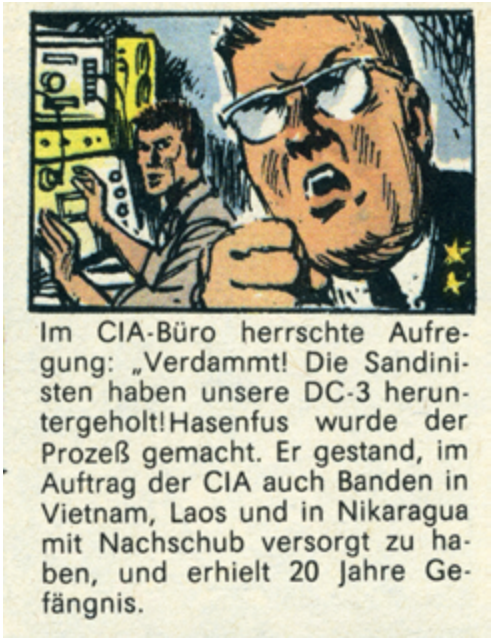

Fig.4. *Atze* (3/1989).

In July of the same year, *Atze* published *Auf den Strassen von Lissabon* [On the Streets of Lisbon],[16] about Portugal and the so-called Carnation Revolution, initially a military coup in Lisbon which overthrew the former authoritarian regime and paved the way for democratic reforms. In the comic, left-wing activists began returning from exile, and new political parties arose. Meanwhile, in the Sheraton Hotel in Lisbon, representatives from the CIA and other NATO-intelligence organisations, along with people from "big business," are discussing countermeasures to stop these movements, as they did in Chile some year before. The image of the CIA deputy is of a "Schreibtischtäter," a kind of mastermind who is deeply conservative, bourgeois, and dangerous. In the story, however, the CIA initiative failed; nevertheless the new revolutionary forces had to remain vigilant, as the *Atze* story concluded.

The story is not far from real events in Portugal at the time. At the beginning of the coup, President Ford was informed that US interests were not in danger, and that the coup could even "provide some near-term benefits for the United States" (Kissinger). But the power struggle that followed "between Communist and moderate forces" concerned American intelligence; especially when they understood that Moscow had "placed itself more fully and openly on the side of the Portuguese Communists and Armed Forces Movement" (*National Intelligence Bulletin*). The *Washington Post* suspected that the USA and other NATO-allies were involved in the Lisbon revolution, and reported that in April, that when the movement was moving to the left, a deputy director of the CIA was sent to Lisbon (Acoca). Thus, the situation in Portugal was not quite under control when the *Atze* story was published in the summer of 1975.

In another story, "Operation Calanda schlägt fehl" [Operation Calanda Fails],[17] we meet CIA field agents in Cuba. This comic, drawn by artist Horst Klöpfel, has the style and appearance of a Western comic. Klöpfel used his long experience in advertising and rarely drew freehand; instead, he worked with photo templates, and used the desired format with appropriate technology. With this method, he became the best realistic draftsman among the GDR-comic artists. In his work for *Atze*, he adopted the style of Western comics, characterized by an interesting picture composition and the use of speech balloons.

The story takes place in 1969, but is obviously inspired by The Bay of Pigs Invasion of Cuba undertaken by a CIA-sponsored paramilitary group in 1961. The CIA agent is a civilian, immediately recognizable with stereotypical dark sunglasses and cowboy hat. But the operation falters because the rural population supports Fidel Castro. In the story a young Cuban boy sets a trap in the jungle for the invaders; some are eaten by crocodiles, others nearly burnt to death by the peasants and the Castro militia. This story is one of the most violent examples of East German comics. When the invaders torture a Cuban peasant to death, one scene is so violent, that the image was discreetly covered by a speech-balloon. Finally, the CIA had to concede defeat. The message is clear: because the Cuban nation supported Fidel Castro, the counterrevolution could be foiled (Fig. 3).

A similar story of CIA failure, this time about Nicaragua and the Sandinista National Liberation Front, appeared in *Atze* in March, 1989: "Hasenfuss am Fallschirm" [Rabbit's Foot on Parachute][18] (Fig. 4). The art is by Günther Hain, one of the most conservative East German comic artists, presenting the typical Altenburger comic style, with a more traditional panel composition and omitting speech balloons. The CIA-backed contras supply aircraft, but the Sandinistas shoot down their DC-3, and the pilot, Hasenfuss (Rabbit's Foot), is arrested and put on trial. When he confesses that he had supplied gangs in Vietnam and Laos for the CIA, he is sentenced to twenty years in prison. The loss of the aircraft precedes an image of the CIA officer, represented by a plump and angry general with glasses that hide his eyes. Two years later, as a peaceful gesture by Nicaragua's National party, Hasenfuss is released from prison. But the contras had not given up.

Chekists Intervene

One expects that the CIA in the *Atze* stories would be the enemy, but what about the KGB? Was the image of the Soviet intelligence more favorable? East German comics do not directly depict the KGB, only the Cheka—the first Soviet state security organization—and the legendary chief of the Soviet secret police, Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky, in "Tschekisten greifen ein" [Chekists Intervene].[19] The hero of the story is the young worker, Pawel Rybakow, who wants to help neglected children and joins

the Cheka. In Moscow, Dzerzhinsky himself briefs him on his new responsibilities. The *Atze* story cites Dzerzhinsky's infamous maxim—a Chekist "has to have a cold head, a hot heart, and clean hands."[20] This slogan was often used in Soviet propaganda to romanticize the image of the Chekists, and, by extension, the image of the KGB.

In the story Pawel promises to do everything possible to stop the counter-revolutionaries. When he arrives at his destination, Petrovsk, he is helped by the regional Cheka. According to them, the trail of the counter-revolutionaries leads to the circus "Karandash" [Pencil]. Pawel goes there undercover and secretly listens to a fierce conversation that exposes the clown as the main enemy. To get him, the Chekists attend the circus performance, where they hear the "clown's dirty jokes about Lenin and the achievements of the revolution." They arrest the clown, who later in the interrogation tearfully confesses and then betrays his companions. "This corruptible clown will receive his just punishment," concludes Pawel, and plans to get rid of all counter-revolutionaries in Petrovsk. After fighting with cunning, Pawel and his comrades succeed and arrest the whole gang. The young East German reader is supposed to conclude that the Cheka, the predecessor of the KGB, were fighting "bandits" and was a friend to all children.

Published in January, 1978, this *Atze* story stands out for including the image of a corruptible "clown making dirty jokes about the achievements of the revolution." In the same year, the novel *Der Gaukler* [The Clown] by Harry Thürk was published, and soon became a bestseller in East Germany. Given that the novel deals with the CIA promoting a Soviet dissident as a Nobel laureate, it is easy to decode that the antagonist is Alexander Solzhenitsyn. This is a key novel about Solzhenitsyn and dissidents in the Soviet Union; thus it was no coincidence that the *Atze* story was in the same spirit.

The Image of the Stasi

Finally, we turn to a specific example of the work of the East German Ministry for State Security, commonly known as the Stasi, published in *Atze* in 1974: "Eine abgeschlossene Akte" [A Closed File].[21] The story begins with a documentary-style introduction from a report by ADN, the East German state news agency, on the sentencing of a West German citizen for four years in prison for "subversive" trafficking:

> May 1974. For months criminal gangs and traffickers, with support of the West German authorities, have been fighting dirty against the GDR. They constantly violate the agreements concluded between the two German states in order to enrich themselves and to harm the GDR.

In 1972, West and East Germany had recognized each other as sovereign states by signing the *Grundlagenvertrag* [Basic Treaty]. Additionally, the Transit Treaty

of May 26th 1972 arranged access to and from West Berlin from West Germany. In this time of détente, human trafficking again became a growing problem for the East German regime. As the GDR increasingly lost its educated workforce, it was the responsibility of state security to deal with *Republikflucht* [desertion from the republic]. Those who assisted escape were viewed as criminal-trafficker gangs. The *Atze* story is about the Stasi smashing a trafficking organization called "Mickat," after its leader. This Mickat was a former criminal smuggler, but he now had a new job smuggling specialists, physicians, and scientists from the GDR to the West. This was more lucrative than smuggling currency, as he had done previously. An unpleasant man with dark glasses, Mickat persuades former GDR citizens to blackmail their educated relatives and former colleagues in order to entice them to the West. The smuggler takes advantage of the transit route, a result of agreements between the two German states, and receives the backing of "the American intelligence service." This form of escape is dangerous, particularly hiding in a car to pass unseen through the border. When the family of a physician understood the risks and hesitates, Mickat forces them; even in the GDR, Mickat was armed. But there was "help." An undercover agent of the GDR-security services had already infiltrated the Mickat gang. At the Stasi headquarters, the comrades, a socialist collective of strong and healthy-looking men, plan the necessary countermeasures. With their well-positioned agent and their network in the GDR, the Mickat gang is stopped for good. This propaganda comic is clear: trafficking organizations are led by criminals, their motive is not humanitarian but quite the opposite, the main forces behind these organizations are Western intelligence services, and escape is extremely dangerous. And as a final warning, the comic suggests that the omniscient Stasi have already infiltrated these gangs.

This story is also based on real situations; for the Stasi, those in the medical profession in particular were suspected of wanting to leave the GDR and were under surveillance. Nevertheless, many succeeded with the help of "escape aid organizations," in Stasi jargon called "traffickers," which the Stasi deliberately infiltrated when possible. In the early years after 1961 these groups were still ideologically marked. Later these organizations became more professional and commercialized, but due their loss of prestige, they often operated in criminal milieus. After 1972, they demanded more money from the escapees, and prices rose from 3,000 DM per refugee to 15,000 by the mid-seventies. Doctors and others in the medical profession in particular developed into one of the main sources of customers for these "escape aid organizations" at the time of the *Atze* story (Wahl).

The Fate of *Atze* Comics

In the 1950s, GDR comics were still very similar to German pre-war comics. Even East German comics about spies, saboteurs, and smugglers were amusing. But this

changed in the 1960s to more realistic stories with increased violence and dangerous enemies. Humor no longer had any place in these political "picture stories." Enemy spies were portrayed as villains and their goals were illegitimate; they dealt in sabotage, industrial espionage, smuggling, and human trafficking. And they did not hesitate to use guns as lethal weapons. They could be politicians and masterminds or criminals working for money, but they always acted immorally. Nonetheless, in *Atze* comics, they were always portrayed as human: there is nothing animalistic or demonic in their appearance.

By contrast, the East German security forces, Volkspolizei, NVA, and Stasi (and even the Cheka) were portrayed as strong, brave, helpful, and noble saviours. *Atze* stories portrayed socialist Stasi collectives and brave field agents ("Kundschafter") in action, and thus played an important role in the regime's struggle for hearts and minds. They enjoyed a certain resonance with their readers, especially with the younger male generation. Even the draftees—military service (18 months) was mandatory for all male citizens in the GDR—were reading these comics, at the very least due to a lack of alternatives. In the case of comics, there were only two magazines—*Atze* and *Mosaik*—and some comic pages in *Frösi* and in several weeklies, but there were hardly any samizdat comics (Handloik). The effectiveness and success of "socialist education" through comics can be deduced when one assumes that most readers would read only a selection of the material. In considering the reception of these comics, one must bear in mind that the relevance of the GDR's propaganda goals was usually fabricated discursively and that other print media, the stage, radio and television, reinforced the ideological messages contained in comics (Lost).

The examples discussed in this chapter demonstrate how *Atze* stories closely followed ideological outlines prescribed by the communist party as well as the concept of the socialist picture story developed by Wolfgang Altenburger, editor of the comic magazines and author of most of the political-history comics. According to Altenburger, comics were dominated by individual images, accompanied by detailed text: word balloons and sound effects were mostly avoided. Using a realistic style, the authors of these comics tried to convey a strong sense of authenticity, but mostly they remained unable to develop complex characters or stories. This probably accounts for why they did not grow in popularity in their time. Today, in contrast to the still popular *Mosaik von Hannes Hegen* (and a handful of funny stories from other comic publications), the political-historical *Atze* stories are rightfully forgotten.

Notes

1 "Junge Pioniere" was the East German youth organisation of schoolchildren aged 6 to 14.

2 For more historical background see Scholz, *Die DDR*, 2009. For the history of comics in the GDR see Lettkemann and Scholz 1994 and the website http://www.ddr-comics.de/. (2018-04-11). For information on the history of GDR-comics in English see Eedy 2014; Eedy 2018; Gersdorf 1996; Piesche 2002; Scholz 2015. East German cultural scientist Paul Thiel first brought GDR comics to light in the English-speaking world (Thiel 1979). As a museum educator at the GDR State Museums in East Berlin, he did what he could to rehabilitate comics in the GDR through lectures, articles, and exhibitions: he even founded a comic society in East Berlin in the late 1970s (Weisshahn).

3 Art: Lothar Paul and Bernard Teschler. *Frösi* (4-7/1954).

4 Art: Richard Hambach. *Frösi* (1-7/1955).

5 Art: Richard Hambach. *Frösi* (2-5/1956).

6 Art: Heinz Rammelt. *Unsere Kameradin. Frauenbeilage des "Grenzpolizisten"* (1957/58).

7 *Unsere Kameradin* (11/1958).

8 Art: Hans Betcke, text: Eckard Rösler. *Atze* (8/1961, 2-3).

9 Art: Karl Fischer. *Atze* (8/1969, 2-7).

10 Hans Speidel, Supreme Commander of the NATO ground forces in Central Europe from 1957 to 1963.

11 Art: Günter Hain. *Atze* (8/1971, 2-7).

12 RIAS (German: Rundfunk im amerikanischen Sektor; English: Broadcasting Service in the American Sector) was a radio and television station in the American Sector of Berlin during the Cold War. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rundfunk_im_amerikanischen_Sektor (2018-04-14).

12 Axel Springer SE, a West German prominent publishing house with headquarters in West Berlin, was publishing many popular dailies around 1960: *BILD; DIE WELT, WELT am SONNTAG, BERLINER MORGENPOST* and *B.Z.*

14 Text: Major K. Peters, art: G. Hain. *Atze* (3/1974, 2-7, 10-11).

15 "Major Meißner erinnert sich" [Major Meissner Remembers]. Art: G. Hain. *Atze* (6/1985, 10-11).

16 Art: G. Hain. *Atze* (7/1975, 2-7,10-11).

17 Art: H. Klöpfel. *Atze* (1/1977, 2-7,10-11).

18 Art: G. Hain. *Atze* (3/1989, 2-7).

19 Art: G. Hain. *Atze* (1/1978, 2-7, 10-11).

20 "Prominent Russians: Felix Dzerzhinsky." https://russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/politics-and-society/felix-dzerzhinsky/ (2018-04-16).

21 Art: G. Hain. *Atze* (10/1974, 2-7, 10-11).

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