

**An Archive-Based Analysis of the
East-Berlin Affair (June 1967 to 1970)**
— **Political and Diplomatic Relations between
South Korea and West Germany** —

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Abstract

This paper discusses the so-called East-Berlin Affair in the late 1960s which is considered the single most important political and diplomatic affair between South Korea and West Germany. In this research we aim to present an overview of the related archival materials available at the political archives of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Berlin. The German documents from the political archives reveal that South Korean nationals suspected of espionage activities against South Korea were forced to leave for Seoul suddenly and that the intelligence officials from South Korea were deeply involved in the German territory for this unlawful operation. The West German government became very upset with this diplomatic affair. Korean government eventually released all the accused who were later found guilty of espionage against South Korea. However, we notice some differences

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in diplomatic strategies between the two countries for solving the case at issue.

Key words: East-Berlin Affair, espionage, German political archive, South Korea, West Germany, North Korea, political and diplomatic relations

I. Introduction

The single most important affair that burdened the political and diplomatic relations between South Korea and West Germany is the so-called East-Berlin Affair in the late 1960s.¹⁾ The objective of this research is to present an overview of the German archival materials contained in the political archives of the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Germany with respect to this unfortunate affair between Korea and Germany. In this affair, seventeen South Korean intellectuals, guest workers and students in West Germany were allegedly forced by South Korean government officials to return to South Korea for investigations, which later found most of them guilty of espionage against South Korea. Some South Koreans in the US, France, and Switzerland were also reported to have been involved in this espionage affair (volume 949, inventory 83). Some of them were blamed for having secretly visited North Korea via East Berlin and for having formed an espionage ring based in East Berlin for Pyongyang. The West German government

¹⁾ cf. Inventory (*Bestand*) 83, Volumes (*Band*) 948, 949, 950 and 951. See also IB5 inventory 37.

was extremely upset at that time, since the South Korean government officials conducted this covert operation against South Korean nationals on West German soil without informing the West German government, and therefore, West German sovereignty was severely violated by a foreign authority.

II. The situational background

The diplomatic relations between North Korea and East Germany were established on November 6, 1949, whereas South Korea and West Germany reopened their diplomatic ties on December 1, 1955. Before official diplomatic relations between South Korea and West Germany were established, the German Red Cross (Ger. *Deutsches Rotes Kreuz*) had already dispatched a hospital ship to South Korea during the Korean War in an effort to join the UN joint-missions to South Korea. German government documents show that, after diplomatic relations between the two countries were opened, South Korea sought to find ways to acquire some advanced knowledge in the areas of natural sciences, engineering and technology from Germany. This effort included various programs in Germany for training South Korean workers and students. During this time, the German government substantially supported and assisted the first five-year economic development plan of the Park Jung Hee Regime (the 3rd Republic) with various financial means. During the early and mid 1960s, the state heads of the two countries also paid mutual visits on friendly terms with each other. It was during this era that many South Korean intellectuals in and out of Korea were

accused of having had close contacts with the alleged North Korean espionage rings in East Berlin. It is also claimed that this political affair was closely related with the parliamentary election strategies of the Parks regime at that time.

The first official diplomatic documents on this unfortunate affair available at the political archive of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs are contained in the volume (*Band*) 948 of the inventory (*Bestand*) 83. The volume starts with the official background reports made by the German Embassy in Seoul on June 21, 1967 that North Korean agent networks in Taegu and in Seoul were detected and destroyed by the South Korean CIA, and that North Korean armed agents intruded an eastern harbor of South Korea (*Samchok*) to stage a guerilla war (cf. Az.: KOS 04-02-07, Tgb.Nr.: 149/67, Bericht Nr.: 28/67). Other similar incidents were reported to have occurred in which North Korean armed agents were detected in *Chunyang* in the district of *Ponghwa* and *Munsan* (approx. 30 km north of Seoul). These violent activities of the North Korean agents and the counter-espionage actions of the South Korean troops and police became the daily agenda in the late 1960s. The agents from the North kept up an unrelenting campaign of attacks on various parts of South Korea, thus escalating the tension. South Korean military security forces and police were also killed throughout the country. This report written by a German military attaché *Oberstleutnant (Lieutenant-Colonel) Druschkowitsch* explains in detail how the inter-Korean situation became increasingly unstable by the destructive communist activities of North Korean armed agents and guerillas in June 1967. The German military attaché further

comments that the attacks launched by North Korean agents target not only the South Korean military forces, but also the civilians, thus setting the entire country under unrest and insecurity. It is of course not immediately clear in the report of the German military attaché why these attacks by the North Korean armed agents occurred all of a sudden during this time, that is, in 1967. In this regard, one needs to understand the historical and political development of both North and South Korea after the Korean War.

It is generally accepted that from the mid 1950s through 1960s, Kim Il Sung put first priority on the rebuilding of the North Korean economy and military facilities after the Korean War. Especially during the late 1950s, there was not much capability on the part of North Korea to mobilize military operations against South Korea, because every effort was made to rebuild the state infrastructure and industrial facilities that were completely destroyed during the war. In light of the priority given to the recovery efforts for the devastated industry in North Korea, it does not come as a surprise that Kim Il Sung focused not on military measures but on peaceful propaganda when it came to the strategies and tactics for treating inter-Korean politics until the beginning of 1960. According to *the History of North Korean provocations* published by the South Korean Ministry of Defense (1998: 283), the period between April 20, 1960 and August 15, 1970 is characterized as a period when North Korea pursued violent revolution for the Korean peninsula. This characterization makes sense because the Students' Revolution on April 19, 1960 in South Korea created disorder and confusion in South Korea and Kim Il Sung wanted to take advantage of this

political chaos to strengthen the anti-government and communist activities in South Korea. This move is also connected with the fact that most communist infra-networks in South Korea were destroyed during the Korean War.

Thus, it can be argued that during the 1960s, it was possible for Kim Il Sung to concentrate more on the rebuilding of the North Korean military capability. One cannot overlook the fact that the recovery efforts for the North Korean economy were also successful compared to South Korea during this period. From 1967 on Kim Il Sung started to test the South Korean and US military security systems either by launching attacks on ships and planes or by sending armed agents and saboteurs, including guerrillas in large numbers. It should be noted it was during this time that one US intelligence boat named *Pueblo* was attacked and captured by North Korean forces on January 23, 1968. Meanwhile, this period was also marked by the political turmoil and tension between Park Jung Hee and the oppositions in South Korea.

III. The evolvement of the affair

On July 6, 1967, the State Secretary of the German Foreign Ministry in Bonn sent an Aide Mémoire to the South Korean Ambassador, requesting an explanation of the sudden departure of a certain number of nationals of the Republic of Korea from the Federal Republic of Germany. From an archival material (July 5, 1967) released from the office of the Foreign ministry, it can be seen, for example, that a Korean pediatrician named Lee

who had been working at a university clinic at Mainz was being escorted by three South Korean officials when from Paris, he sent an express airmail to his wife in Mainz, Germany, saying that he has to leave for Seoul suddenly and to stay there for a while. The university clinic director in Mainz was not informed of the sudden departure of Dr. Lee, and after two days of his disappearance the clinic director stopped paying Dr. Lee's salary. Tens days after his disappearance, the director filed a missing persons report to the police for the Korean doctor. The Korean nationals who were recalled to South Korea included academics, students and coal-miners, and they were investigated in Seoul for having possible contacts with North Korea.

All these circumstances forced the concerned German authorities to conclude that these Korean nationals in Germany had to leave for Seoul suddenly without even having sufficient time to inform their close family members and friends in Germany. The various correspondences among German authorities such as Federal Criminal Office and police indicate that the Korean nationals left Germany without luggage and bags and that their personal belongings remained intact at their residences.

In response to the first Aide Mémoire from the German Foreign Ministry, the Korean Ambassador responded that "the investigation authorities in the Republic of Korea recalled 17 nationals of the Republic of Korea in the Federal Republic of Germany in connection with an investigation of large scale subversive and espionage activities of the North Korean Communist agents with the purpose of overthrowing the government of the Republic of Korea, thereby attempting to

communize the southern part of Korea." The Korean Ambassador General Choi, Duk Shin²⁾ further stated that "in view of the urgency and secrecy of the case, the Korean authorities hastened to take prompt actions to persuade those who are involved in the case to return to Korea to appear before the Korean authorities" (cf. volume 948 I-III, inventory 83).

With respect to this diplomatic affair the first official meeting between Korean Ambassador, General Choi, and the German State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took place at 4 PM on July 6, 1967 at the German Foreign Ministry in Bonn. At this arranged parley, the German State Secretary strongly demanded from the Korean Ambassador and his government to cooperate in the process of clearing up the sudden departure of Korean nationals whose names were already presented to the Korean Embassy. The diplomatic notes (Aufzeichnung ZA5 - 92.A/67) from the German side show that the Korean Ambassador first noticed that for the first time he was occupied with this annoying matter in such a personal dialogue. The Korean Ambassador was seen as taking it for granted that the German Federal Government took this unfortunate matter so seriously. During the conversation with the German State Secretary,

²⁾ Ambassador Choi, who was a famous independence movement leader during the Japanese occupation and an anti-communist general during the Korean War, resigned from his post a couple of days after the espionage affair was brought to light. He later defected to the USA and joined the anti Park-Regime movement in the seventies and even joined a political group that forcefully occupied the South Korean Embassy in Bonn after the assassination of President Park. Ambassador Choi even defected with his wife later to North Korea in 1986 after having visited Kim Il Sung a few times. He died in Pyongyang in 1989. His father is known to have been the teacher of Kim Il Sung at a 'Chundokyo' school named 'Hwa.sung.ui.sook'(華成義塾) during the 1920s in Manchuria (cf. Han 2000).

the Korean Ambassador further stated that during his incumbency he has always made efforts to improve the relations, not only between the two governments, but also between the two peoples. Ambassador Choi is said to have regretted that the matters have now evolved like this. At this interlocution, Ambassador Choi assured the German State Secretary that he would immediately report to his government with respect to the Aide memoire from the German government and hoped that he could quickly give precise answers to the questions raised therein.

However, Ambassador Choi had already mentioned in the presence of the German State Secretary that he was informed by the South Korean government that evidently the Korean nationals in question were involved with an espionage ring organized by North Korean Embassy in East Berlin and that the South Korean government wanted to investigate them in Korea. The Ambassador Choi also emphasized that, contrary to the expectation, the dispatched officials from the South Korean police did not turn to the Korean Embassy but they directly contacted the concerned people and that the officials from Korea tried to persuade the people in question to return to Korea voluntarily. According to the Ambassador, the officials were also reported to have informed the people in question that it would be best for the interest of the involved that they return to Seoul to clarify the accusations raised against them. Ambassador Choi further explained that so far as he was informed, the Korean nationals in question returned to Seoul voluntarily. However, we notice from various documents that the German government speculated that the Korean nationals were forced to return to Korea with various forms of threats and conciliation regarding family

members in Korea. In the first conversation with the Korean Ambassador Choi, the German State Secretary reminds the Korean partner of the concerns of the German public opinion at that time.

From later correspondences from the Korean government to the German Foreign Ministry, we also note that the South Korean government stressed the fact that South Korea and West Germany are pursuing the common goal, namely fighting against communism in the world. Fighting against world communism together seemed to be an important cause for South Korea for seeking understanding from the German government, when it came to solving this unfortunate diplomatic affair between the two countries.

The South Korean Foreign Minister, Choi, Kyu-Ha, at that time also expressed at the press conference in Seoul that the Korean nationals who returned to Korea complied with the Korean officials and that they returned to Seoul voluntarily (press conference on July 19, 1967). This official statement of the South Korean government did not satisfy the German government in Bonn at all, since it turned out that the 17 Koreans disappeared from Germany suddenly at intervals of two to five days. German Federal Criminal Office, local police in North Rhine Westphalia, Federal Justice Ministry, and the Federal Ministry of Interior were mobilized to investigate the possible kidnapping cases thoroughly.

The German Embassy in Seoul also expressed the critical opinion in a letter (dated July 20, 1967) to the Foreign Ministry in Bonn that, from the German point of view, it is obviously difficult to understand Korean laws such as the anti-communist law. In the eyes of German diplomats, Korean authority was also reported to have

the attitude of downplaying the significance of the Western freedom and democratic process (report from German Embassy in Seoul on February 23, 1968). It also came to pass that a South Korean secret agency (KCIA) was deeply involved in the case. The official South Korean statement on the involvement of the secret agency was that the activity of the secret agency was needed to persuade the concerned Koreans to return to Korea on their own as quickly as possible. However, the political archives contain a confidential Note Verbal (July 24, 1967) of the Korean Embassy that the government of the Republic of Korea deeply regrets that officials of the Korean authorities acted in the Federal Republic of Germany, without prior consultation with or approval of the German authorities in this unfortunate matter. In this Note Verbal, the Korean government also wished to assure the German government that this kind of act will not recur in the future.

The archival material at the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs also reveals that the most imminent and pressing concern of the German government with respect to this incident was the violation of the German sovereignty by a foreign authority on German soil. From the onset, the German government demanded from the South Korean government that the kidnapped South Koreans be released and be returned to West Germany at once, because only by doing so would the violated diplomatic relation be normalized and resumed. The archival sources of the German side also reveal that the German foreign ministry was under enormous political pressure from both the public opinion and the parliament (July 24, 1967, Aufzeichnung ZA 5-104A/67, vol. 949, inventory 83). The German diplomatic documents also

show that many Western newspapers in the US (e.g. New York Times) and in Europe (for example, France and Norway) reported on this happening with keen attention.

An important piece of information for understanding the German diplomatic position is in order. It should be also noted that a similar kidnapping by a foreign authority happened previously in Munich on February 26, 1963. The French secret agents conducted a covert operation in Munich, Germany to arrest a French right-wing extremist Antoine Argoud, a leading figure of an armed resistance movement in Algeria against De Gaulle. This act was executed without consultation with the German authority and on January 2, 1964 the French government finally declined to deliver Mr. Argout to the German authority, even though Germany exerted enormous diplomatic efforts to solve the case. This incident of course haunted German government as a sovereign nation for a long time. Germans at that time felt 'wir sind immer noch ein besetztes Land' (we are still an occupied nation). The archival documents show that with respect to the Korean case, this French case with *Argoud* is constantly referred to within the circle of the top officials of the concerned German authorities.

Despite the strong stance of the German government, the South Korean government wanted to investigate this case at all costs in an effort to deter possible attempts by people in and out of Korea to have contacts with North Korea. It turned out that seven Koreans in Germany visited North Korea once or twice between August 1961 and August 1965 under the instructions of the North Korean authorities, traveling either through Soviet Russia or China. It is not surprising that South Korean government constantly mentions the connections

with espionage activities of North Korea in view of the situational background explained in section 2. According to the Aide Memoire (July 24, 1967) from the Korean embassy, we can also see that the South Korean government shared the opinion that by means of a wide range and sophisticatedly organized network extending throughout free European nations, the North Korea has been infiltrating agents secretly into the Republic of Korea.

Upon the demand of the German government, however, the government in Seoul made arrangements such that three South Korean diplomats who were allegedly involved in and responsible for the kidnapping cases had to leave Germany for Seoul immediately and that five South Koreans who were recalled to Korea were released very soon and could fly back to Germany. As for the remaining Koreans, the Korean government expressed the opinion that they would be given the possibility to proceed to Germany of their own will when they were cleared of suspicion in the course of the investigation. This position of South Korea further aggravated the diplomatic relations with West Germany in the years to come.

It should be also noted that the main concern of the opposition party (NDP: New Democratic Party) at that time in South Korea was not the fair treatment of the Korean nationals from Germany, but the sensitive diplomatic issues that might rapidly deteriorate the relationship between South Korea and West Germany. The view on communism is also portrayed in South Korea differently than in Germany. The German Embassy in Seoul also reported that communism in Korea is not just a matter of political ideology, but a matter of life

and death, given the fact that South Korean authority, police and civilians were harassed quite often by armed agents from the North during that time. In the archival materials we find that these circumstances on the Korean Peninsula were treated and interpreted cautiously when it came to the diplomatic maneuvers of the German side.

The German foreign ministry recorded at that time that the German media were extremely unhappy with, and furious at, the attitudes and actions of the South Korean government and that many German universities, academic and cultural organizations, and prominent figures including Nobel laureates handed protest letters to the German government, the Korean Embassy in Bonn, and the Korean government in Seoul (cf. Bestand 83, Band 951). Finally, the German government threatened the South Korean government with the possibility of discontinuing the development aids and projects that were promised or on-going for Korea (cf. Bestand 37, Band 416, 82.70.92.23). The on-going project for inviting Korean coal-miners to Germany was also frozen for the time being (cf. Bestand 83, Band 951). The development aids also included installing a power plant in South Korea. Furthermore, we also find evidences that in order to put more pressure on the Korean counterpart, German government was considering more drastic measures such as the possibility of breaking off diplomatic ties with South Korea (volume 480, inventory 37).

We can also retrieve several important mutual correspondences between the South Korean President, Park, and the German Federal President, Lübke, regarding this incident. They were already on friendly terms due to the exchange state visits. In a series of confidential writings from the high level officials from

both sides, one can foresee that the presidential pardon will be eventually granted to the Korean nationals who were accused in Seoul of espionage for North Korea. The archival materials also contain evidences suggesting that the US Embassy in Seoul was trying to mediate between South Korea and Germany regarding this affair.

Of course, this highly charged political affair provided North Korean government in Pyongyang with some good reason to criticize the South Korean government. In fact, we find an official North Korean statement on this issue at the archival material of the former East Germany on North Korea (cf. official communiqué from the North Korean foreign ministry on September 19, 1967, C1086/70 *Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheit*) in which North Korea criticizes the anti-communist policy of President Park and the American imperialism regarding this incident.

Finally, South Korea and West Germany have agreed to normalize their relations in January 1969, which were strained by the alleged kidnapping case. A German special presidential envoy, Dr. Frank, is dispatched to South Korea to end the uncomfortable tensions between Seoul and Bonn (cf. Bestand 37, Band 479, 1969). It took almost three years to end the political and diplomatic dilemma between the two countries.

IV. Educational implication of this study

In recent years the public in South Korea have been following up with keen interest the political discourse on how to come to terms with the past. It is also a well

known fact that the successive military regimes in South Korea have violated democratic principles and human rights in the past. The East-Berlin Affair is considered one of those cases that call for an objective clarification from the government side. Aside from the domestic political matters in Korea at that time, we can gain some objective understanding on how both South Korea and Germany dealt with this matter reciprocally in the past ,if we investigate the (un)official archival materials on this issue. The fact-based discussions in this paper help to raise political consciousness and promote political education required for a democratic society to develop internal democratic processes and promote international relations. At the same time, the research conducted here seeks to create a vitally necessary dialogic context to continue the fact-based dialogues between the past and the present that ensure a mutual base and common ground to explore the sometimes irreducible differences between people's political values and attitudes.

V. Conclusion

This study analyzed the so-called East-Berlin Affair in the late 1960s which is considered the single most important political and diplomatic affair between South Korea and West Germany. In this research we presented an overview of the related archival materials available at the political archives of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Berlin. From the political archive of the German Foreign Ministry we find a good deal of materials regarding this unfortunate diplomatic affair between

South Korea and West Germany. Given the fact that the South Korean nationals suspected of espionage activities against South Korea were forced to leave for Seoul suddenly and that the intelligence officials from South Korea were involved in the German territory, it is natural that the West German government became very upset with this diplomatic affair. Eventually Korean government released the accused Korean nationals who were later found guilty of espionage against South Korea. However, we have noticed some differences in diplomatic strategies between the two countries for solving the case at issue. From the beginning the German government demanded from Seoul that the concerned Korean nationals be released and returned to West Germany immediately because only by doing so would the violated diplomatic relation be normalized. The archival sources of the German side also reveal that the German foreign ministry was under enormous political pressure from both the public opinions and the parliament. On the other hand, whereas from early on the Korean government expressed regret to the German government that South Korea committed a severe diplomatic mistake on the German soil by deploying government officials unlawfully, the government in Seoul insisted on investigating the concerned people and bringing the accused to court. Finally, the German government threatened the Korean government with the possibility of stopping development aids and projects. Even though the German demands were all met, it took almost three years to end the uneasy case between the two countries. In this research we have dealt with the diplomatic materials from the German political archive only. However, the present author shares the view that other materials and sources

such as individual letters and private archives regarding this case will contribute substantially to the further research for a more accurate and objective account of the entire case.

It is hoped that the research conducted here can contribute to enhancing a vitally necessary dialogic context to continue the fact-based dialogues between the past and the present in the political environments in and out of Korea.

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