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Title: The Blue Danube Leaks
Author: Yale Richmond

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Editor's Note: Our frequent contributor of Cold War tales gives us a look at a little known aspect of public diplomacy during those times.—Ed.

The recent WikiLeaks stories have reminded me that I was once an authorized leaker of American Embassy reports from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

In November 1961, I was assigned to Vienna to head USIA's Special Projects Office (SPO), a misnomer if there ever was one. In Soviet parlance, anything with the word "special" implied something secret or with an intelligence connection. That was not true of the Special Projects Office, a unit of USIS Vienna, although there was one rather unusual aspect of its work that I did not learn of until I arrived in Vienna.

During the Cold War Vienna had a well-deserved reputation as a city of espionage and intrigue. Both the Soviet and American embassies had large intelligence sections, for the Soviets the KGB and GRU (military intelligence), and for the Americans the CIA. Their doings were not usually so dramatic as portrayed in the film, "The Third Man," but there was often something going on behind the scenes that was not made public.

SPO's principal purpose was to provide support for the public diplomacy work of our embassies in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. To do that, we had a large and highly skilled Austrian staff that could prepare small photo exhibits on American themes, or larger exhibits for countries like Poland where such exhibits were possible. SPO also had a first-rate printing plant that could produce pamphlets and other printed material on short notice for distribution by our embassies in the East. And it had the largest photo archive in Austria, with photos from Eastern and Western Europe, and the United States, which were made available gratis to the Austrian and foreign press to embellish their articles.

Another SPO product was a Monday to Friday daily bulletin of news and feature stories from the radio broadcasts and print media of the East European satellites, as they were then rightly called. Austrian employees of SPO, fluent in the languages of Eastern Europe, would monitor radio newscasts from Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, in the office during the day and at home in the evening. They would also scan the print media of those countries, which could be purchased in Vienna, and translate into German items that would be of interest to the Austrian press and correspondents of the Western media stationed in Vienna but whose "beat" was Eastern Europe.

The SPO bulletin was similar to the bulletin produced by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), but was distributed to recipients on the day of its publication. Many Western publications found it more convenient, as well as comfortable, to base their correspondents in neutral Austria rather than in Communist Eastern Europe where living and working conditions were difficult, travel was often restricted, and where they could not always report what they wished. Many of the news stories filed by correspondents from Vienna in those years with the lead “Travelers from... report that...” were based on reports from SPO. “SPO also maintained an extensive unclassified archive on the East European countries which was used by Western correspondents and visiting scholars.

The unusual aspect of SPO was not a task that was written into my job description, nor was it to be found in any classified document. SPO regularly received copies of classified reports from our embassies in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union – telegrams as well as dispatches that came via the diplomatic pouch – and it was my job to leak selected contents to Western correspondents in Vienna, after having duly “sanitized” them by deleting references to embassy sources and other information whose confidentiality had to be protected. At my discretion I could leak information that was newsworthy and reflected unfavorably on the East European regimes but had not been made public by the Communist-controlled press.

When I was briefed on that aspect of the job, I asked if Washington would protect me if I made a mistake and leaked something that I should not have. “No,” was the response, I was on my own, and would have to suffer the consequences of any errors I made.

Fortunately, during my two years in Vienna I made no errors, although I had a close call once. To M.S. “Mike” Handler, the veteran New York Times correspondent in Vienna, I had given excerpts, duly sanitized, from a dispatch of our Budapest Legation. Based on that dispatch, Handler filed a story that was published in the Times. But a few days later, Budapest informed me that something in the Handler story was in error. What to do?

I so informed Handler, and he came up with a ruse to protect himself and the Times, and enable him to maintain the confidence of his contacts in Hungary. At his suggestion, I made a visit to the Times office in Vienna and, in a room that Handler believed was bugged, I informed him, in a loud and clear voice, that the information on which he had based his story was in error. That “confession” of mine got him and the Times off the hook and enabled him to maintain the confidence of his contacts in Hungary and continue his respected reporting.

About the author: **Yale Richmond** is a writer and former Foreign Service Officer who lives in Washington, D.C. His latest books are *Understanding the Americans: A Handbook for Visitors to the United States* (Hippocrene Books, 2009), and *From Nyet to Da: Understanding the New Russia*, 4th edition (Intercultural Press, 2009). He served in Moscow as Counselor for Press and Culture, 1967-69.

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