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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
THE DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

December 6, 1961

MEMORANDUM

TO : All INR Offices
FROM : INR/DDR- Allan Evans
SUBJECT: Examples of Intelligence Problems

STATE DEPT. DECLASSIFICATION REVIEW
 Retain class'n Change to
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EO 12958 25X 1
FPO/HDR by O.D. 8/11/2014 Date 11/24/17
DECLASSIFIED 1/24/19

The Bureau recently undertook a review of information available which might have enabled INR to predict (as it did not do) the building of the sector wall in Berlin on August 13, 1961, and the coup which separated Syria from the United Arab Republic a month later. Excerpts from the resulting report may be useful to illustrate to newcomers in INR some of the difficulties and mental hazards of our business.

The purpose of this reading is neither to relieve the reader's mind by implying that we cannot know and therefore should not worry, nor to weigh him down with the prospect of constant frustration. It is to implant in him a certain reserve-- a realization that forewarning may be slight even for considerable events, and that chance or sudden decisions may undermine projections or anticipations based on the tightest of logic.

The reader will note in each case one or two faults of judgment or interpretation. These faults tend, paradoxically enough, to argue for an escape from reserve, in the sense that our officers must keep themselves imaginatively prepared to expect change, possibly radical change, in existing situations.

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Before the coup in Syria, information about the situation there included reports, EO25X1 of a considerable number of alleged potential coups; scantiest among these items was mention of the individuals who pulled off the actual coup.

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-2-

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Furthermore, although we were aware of manifold and widespread dissatisfaction, the security provisions of the Nasser regime, such as its selection and rotation of officers in the armed forces, were taken to argue against the likelihood of a coup, when set against the tenuousness and shifting of relationships reported amongst the plotters, and the intermittent flow of information.

Direct reporting capabilities from Syria were strictly limited after the union with Egypt. Our view of political activities in the officer corps was obscured by tight UAR military security and by the general unwillingness of Syrian officers to reveal clandestine activity to the US, which they regard as too closely associated with Israel.

This coup and previous ones in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab world hold the lesson that chance is an inescapable factor. The coalescing of a coup group and its decision to act depend on many conditions that develop quickly

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[REDACTED] and may not to any great extent require central or large-scale coordination. The very lack of detailed and comprehensive planning probably explains the surprise that was achieved in Syria.

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Regarding Berlin, two items of information specifically and explicitly point to the building of a wall. The often cited "plans for the wall" were brought out of East Germany, apparently in 1958,

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-3-

but they were only one in a series of GDR contingency plans. On June 15, 1961, Ulbricht at a press interview, replying to a question about state frontiers, gratuitously embroidered his answer with the remark that "no one has any intention of building a wall at the Brandenburg Gate." It could have been deduced that he had the notion of a wall on his mind.

Better evidence, though the idea was only implicit, resided in numerous circumstantial reports, which turned out to be correct, that Berlin members of the FDJ (Free German Youth) had been ordered to attend a rally in the Potsdamer Platz on August 14, to hear a speech by Ulbricht. These reports were discounted on the basis that Ulbricht was unlikely to appear in a border area so exposed -- as it was before August 13.

The interpretation of these items was affected at the time by numerous indirect indications which lent themselves to alternative interpretations. There were pointers to action impending against refugees:

- the employment of increasing numbers of military and security personnel to stop travellers en route to Berlin;

- the propaganda campaign on western "slave trading";

- a sudden emphasis on financial losses the GDR allegedly was suffering due to this "trade in human beings" (3 billion marks yearly).

There were indications of impending security measures:

- the weighting of the GDR delegation to Moscow in April with party officials connected with security;

- delivery of the SED July Plenum keynote speech -- primarily an economic speech -- by the Politburo's security secretary;

- the Warsaw Pact party secretaries' meeting in Warsaw August 3-5;

- refugee reports that SED functionaries were openly speculating on a border closure;

-- EO25X1 reports

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-4-

-- EO25X1 reports that all leaves for Berlin SED
functionaries were cancelled from mid-July on;

-- reports Ulbricht had set a September 1 deadline on
GDR preparations for achieving immunity from Western economic
counter-measures.

There were reports through other channels forecasting some border
action, but they never indicated what specific action was pending.

In short, there were many indications, but too few of them
specific enough to warrant alighting on this one interpretation
among the possible alternatives. The information received could
just as well have pointed to the establishment of a zone of restricted
travel around the whole of Berlin, and plans for just such a move
were reported both through clandestine and refugee channels. Another
interpretation was that the GDR would impose stringent travel
restrictions throughout all of East Germany. In our own and in
community discussions, the possibility of sealing the sector border
was examined, but we judged this action unlikely at the time both
because of the physical difficulties involved and because of the
view that the USSR, still holding the position that the four-power
agreements on Berlin remain in effect until a peace treaty, would
not wish to risk so serious a breach of the quadripartite status.

It may be noted that we still do not know when the decision
was made to build the wall and to focus on this action preparations
that were probably initiated with more than one alternative
contingency in view. The decision may well have been taken no
sooner than the Warsaw Pact meeting in early August.

East German security was good. It appears that only a few top
GDR officials knew in advance that closing off the sector was the
contingency to be materialized. Certainly the British, French, and
West Germans were no better prepared than we were. I think it is
fair to say that in the intelligence situation described, and on
so specific an act, only a lucky guess would have brought out
the right answer.

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The intelligence problems relating to the two events were
complex. It was not, it appears, a question of obtaining evidence
of an action that had been decided some time in advance, and for
which specific preparations were going forward. In each case the
actual decision seems to have occurred only a short time before the

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-5-

action, and the problem was the more difficult one of estimating in advance what the action party's decision would be (and for Syria who the action party would be). In each case, furthermore, the weight of information and the general pattern of events pointed to alternative prospects. The details suggest that only a very lucky break would have brought direct evidence of the decision, and only an individual flash of intuition, acceptable probably to no one else, would have selected the actual event among the alternative prospects offered for our judgment.

The lessons are plain. First, when we are watching closed societies and the not uncommon situation of a general tension with a considerable build-up in action potential, some individual events are going to take place without specific prior intelligence warning. In various combinations, the obstacles to observation, the often slippery quality of the human actors, the play of chance and opportunistic last minute decisions -- these and other factors will guarantee us plenty of surprises.

Secondly, not even surprise can be considered a fault of intelligence. We should, therefore, as now take advantage of these examples of fallibility to review our processes and our knowledge, while not permitting them to unnerve us and cause us to begin playing safe by crying wolf.

The purpose of the exercise will be attained if the reader finds himself somewhat confirmed in both a scepticism toward unduly rigid intellectual projections of future events and an alert appreciation that present situations almost anywhere on the globe may change rapidly and radically.

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