

Exfiltration and US Policy

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Exfiltration, the clandestine escape of persons from an enemy-controlled area, was a prime motivation for the building of the Berlin Wall, continuing in Berlin long after the Wall's construction. The Department of State "reacted forcefully" against both U.S. private civilian and military personnel involvement in exfiltration, as is evident in a November 23, 1965, memorandum from Minister John A. Calhoun of the U.S. Mission Berlin (USBER) to Major General John F. Franklin Jr., U.S. Commander, Berlin, declassified as part of this project. (Figure 1) The memorandum mentions a "regular program of measures" to prevent the involvement of members of the armed forces, but provides more detail with regard to the Department of State's reaction to private civilian attempts to aid escapees, which could take the form of an official warning from USBER, or an attempt by State to enlist the civilian's parents in deterring involvement. Calhoun felt that successful deterrence rested upon the accurate assessment of the potential American citizens' intentions. He asked Gen. Franklin for "a more systematic approach to the problem of obtaining information" via surveillance programs already in place, in order to find evidence of unofficial American involvement in exfiltration in the hopes of discouraging it.

The obvious benefits realized by the West in increasing the rate of successful exfiltration of East Berliners, however, required a more complex policy. Two separate briefings were provided to military personnel serving in Berlin in May 1975: one for enlisted personnel, discouraging U.S. involvement entirely, and one for officers, suggesting a program more tailored to the minimization of impact to U.S. military personnel in exfiltration incidents not discovered by the Soviets. The contrast between these two briefings corroborates a continuing policy of toleration--but not at the expense either of public safety or of free American access to East Berlin.

Official U.S. vehicles, vehicle plates, and personnel uniforms were all implicated as tools used by East German refugees to escape to the West. This use of American "cover" to aid escapees caused concern over the ability of the Department of State to protect private U.S. citizens in West Berlin; officials feared that Soviet representatives would detain more of the U.S. and other Allied personnel and vehicles which entered East Berlin. The policy excerpt shown here (also Figure 1), from November 1965, expresses this concern, but contrasted that with the "general desirability" of successful escape.

The concerns raised in the excerpt are laid out in more detail by a January 26, 1966 memorandum from the Department of State's James Carson to John A. Calhoun in Berlin. The memorandum outlines actions that State Department officials should take in any of several situations should East German guards suspect that vehicles with U.S. license plates may be carrying refugees through the various checkpoints between East and West Berlin. For example,

should a vehicle with a U.S. license plate be shown by U.S. checkpoint records not to have entered East Berlin at that checkpoint, the official could presume that the plates were either stolen or forged, and that the vehicle's occupants were either refugees or those assisting them. Alternatively, if a US licensed vehicle known to have entered East Berlin should be detained upon its return, the State Department official should demand the presence of a Soviet officer-- knowing that it was unlikely that this official would appear according to Soviet policy on their role in East Germany--considerably hampering the possible actions of the East German checkpoint guards while pressuring the guards to allow the vehicle to proceed regardless of its occupants. The end game, said Carson, was to "not open ourselves to charges of having too easily handed over any refugees," but ultimately providing tacit assistance when possible.