

A once sensational and mysterious intelligence betrayal is examined in the perspective of time for motivation and key circumstances.

THE DEFECTIONS OF DR. JOHN

Delmege Trimble

Rain streaked the streets of Berlin, splashed on darkened houses, glistened in the light from an East-West border checkpoint. A sedan rolled up, its tires singing on the wet pavement. A customs guard sauntered out. For a moment there was only the throb of the engine, a murmur of conversation, the rhythmic click of the windshield wipers. Then the wave of a hand, and the car rolled across the Sandkrug Bridge into the darkness of East Berlin.

A simple incident on this warm, wet night of 20 July 1954, the decennial of a more famous 20 July. Simple, but so fraught with significance for Germany and the West that Chancellor Adenauer called it "terrifying." Dr. Otto John, president of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, had defected. He was the most important Westerner fallen into Communist hands since the two British diplomats, Guy Burgess and Donald MacLean, had vanished from London in 1951, and far more important than they in point of implications for intelligence.

The puzzle was—and to some still is—the reason why, the causes behind the eastward flight of the Federal Republic's internal security chief in the company of a trumpet-playing gynecologist, a Dr. Wolfgang Wohlgemuth. The contemporary explanations ranged the spectrum. The easiest one, that Wohlgemuth was a Soviet agent who had drugged John and abducted him, foundered on facts that gradually came to light. Some said that John, a mixed-up idealist, had been spurred across the border by a misguided concept of political morality. Some regarded him as a victim of machinations on the part of the neo-Nazis and clerical and other reactionary circles around Chancellor Adenauer. His flight was pictured by

others as that of a desperate man whose past was about to catch up with him. Yet others called him a long-time traitor and informer, even a secret Communist fanatic.

There were prejudicial grounds for some of the least pretty interpretations. John's weaknesses for alcohol and the opposite sex were well known, his favorite sport when pixedated being to snap the elastic of women's brassieres. It was persistently rumored that he was a double agent or a homosexual, and he certainly had an affinity for too many characters with one or both of these qualifications. Aside from his companion Wohlgemuth, who had connections with the East Berlin Charité Hospital and made no secret of his Communist sympathies, John was on good terms with Soviet agent Max Wonsig, blown at the Willi Kucher spy trial, and more notably with one Baron Wolfgang Gans Edler Herr von und zu Putlitz. Von und zu Putlitz had been a prewar British agent in the Nazi Foreign Office, whisked to the safety of England in 1938; subsequently he worked in the United States for OWI until he was fired and his valet had to support him by tending bar; later he returned to British employ in Germany; and in 1950 he started working for the Communists in East Berlin.

Yet the stereotype of the weak man made vulnerable by his lusts or corrupted by bad company is not one that fits the Otto John picture. And all the other theses, each arguable, strike only tangentially at the truth. Erich Ollenhauer may have come closer when he remarked, after John redefected and began to show increasing signs of a persecution and Messiah complex, "This is a case for the psychiatrists rather than the politicians." We cannot even now arrive at anything like a tidy analysis of the case, but we can achieve some understanding of it by tracing John's propensities during the Nazi and Nuremberg eras, reviewing the circumstances of his unlikely appointment and ineffectual tenure as president of the Bundesamt fuer Verfassungsschutz, and examining in detail his behavior just before and after his defection on that 1954 anniversary of the unsuccessful 20 July anti-Hitler coup.¹

¹ Except as otherwise indicated, the authority for factual statements in the following account rests in classified documents in U.S., ~~██████████~~ intelligence files.

Role in the Anti-Nazi Underground

Otto John was born in 1909. Two friendships from his early life remained of importance in his adult career and were to play a part in the events of July 1954. During his school days at Wiesbaden in the mid-twenties he became a close chum of Wolfgang Hoefler, son of the school principal. The intensity of German schoolboy friendships is reflected in the eventual tragedy that flowered from this early acquaintance. Hoefler, whose mother was Jewish, emigrated to the United States in the late 1930's. He changed his name to Hoffer, became a U.S. citizen and a soldier. In 1945 he was sent to Germany and renewed his friendship with Otto John. In 1954, upon John's defection, he committed suicide.

An emotionally more important relationship for Otto was that with his brother Hans, another marked for tragedy. Hans, the younger, brighter, and sturdier, was the extrovert doer, Otto the troubled dreamer. Otto felt no fraternal jealousy; he adored the younger brother who, as long as he lived, supplied the balance Otto needed. Hans was to be tortured to death in the aftermath of the abortive July 1944 coup.

Otto studied for a career in the foreign service, mastering Spanish, French, and English. But when Hitler came to power membership in the Nazi Party became a prerequisite for aspirants to the foreign service, and he shifted to international law. Never a member of any political party (though after the war he once referred to himself as a quondam Socialist), he said his convictions were a blend of monarchism, old-fashioned liberalism, and anti-Nazism. He received the doctorate in law from Frankfurt University in 1935.

By 1936 both John brothers were in Berlin. Hans was studying law at Berlin University. Otto served for two years without pay at Tempelhof Airdrome to qualify for final state law examinations in the service of Lufthansa. In 1937 he became assistant legal counsel, under Klaus Bonhoeffer, of the rapidly expanding civil airline. He was now in a position to do something positive about his anti-Nazi convictions. Through Klaus and his brother Dietrich, a Lutheran minister, he entered one of the circles that later were to band in the conspiracy against Hitler. An airline with routine flights into foreign countries was a convenient front for a conspiracy against a

totalitarian regime.² Klaus Bonhoeffer assigned Otto to several courier runs.

When World War II broke in September 1939 Hans John went into the Luftwaffe as a lieutenant, but Otto remained with Lufthansa. That autumn he established connections with such anti-Nazis as the Social Democrat Wilhelm Leuschner and Col. General von Beck. Prince Louis Ferdinand, grandson of the Kaiser, had quit his job in a Ford plant in the United States to work for Lufthansa, and Otto John, along with Johannes Popitz, the Prussian Finance Minister, became a chief promoter of the Prince's pretensions to the throne in Carl Goerdeler's early schemes for a Hohenzollern restoration.³ Louis Lochner, former chief of the Berlin Bureau of the Associated Press, said that on several occasions he accompanied John to meetings in Berlin of the Goerdeler and Louis Ferdinand groups.

Death was to sluff most of Otto's co-conspirators off the stage long before his own desertion, whether through natural causes, official executions, or the goon squads rampant at Germany's last gasp. But Louis Ferdinand remained a member of the cast through the last act. John cultivated him not only because he and his wife Kira, a former Grand Duchess of Russia, were very pleasant social companions but also because John, with his royalist inclinations, was flattered at being allowed to address the Prince by his intimate family nickname, "Lulu."

Beyond these contacts with conspiracy and his flights to neutral countries, Otto's specific resistance activities during this early period are unknown. In 1941 he passed considerable classified information about the Luftwaffe to U.S. correspondent Lochner. Strained attempts have been made to link him a little later with Rote Kapelle, the Communist radio-espionage group active in Berlin in 1941-42. No evidence is avail-

² Many clandestine interests capitalized on the advantages of this airline's international flights: Admiral Wilhelm Canaris' Abwehr faction, carrying on its own intrigues against the Nazis, had planted agents in it; Himmler's SS and the Gestapo had both infiltrated it; and the Soviets are believed to have recruited a pilot on the Berlin-Moscow run, a man named Radunsk.

³ Gerhard Ritter, *The German Resistance*, pp. 191-2.

able to support any such connection, although it has been taken for granted that his brother Hans had Communist affiliations.

When eyebrows were raised over the appearance of the healthy Otto in mufti, he entered the Abwehr, likely on Goerdeler's suggestion and through the good offices of General Oster, the activist conspirator under Admiral Canaris. He was assigned to Abwehrstelle Stettin but told that his primary mission was to seek better surrender terms for Germany once Hitler was removed, using his Abwehr commission simply as cover. Threads linking the various opposition groups were now being slowly knit, and John probably provided liaison among those in the Abwehr, in the Army High Command, around Leuschner and Julius Leber, Louis Ferdinand, etc., whose heretofore diffuse activity was manifest in the ineffectual half-dozen different attempts to remove Hitler between 1939 and 1943.

The year 1942 was eventful for him. He was using business trips to Madrid and Lisbon, ostensibly for the purpose of acquiring more Lufthansa runways, to re-establish resistance contacts with the British and try to activate the acquaintance between Prince Louis Ferdinand and President Roosevelt, who had once put the Prince up at Blair House. During this year he was turned in to the Gestapo by an aging and jealous pre-war mistress, Frau Ameliess Pabst, and was rescued by his Abwehr connections. Also in 1942 Hans returned from the Russian front badly wounded and was taken to the famous surgeon Dr. Sauerbruch, who numbered among his assistants at the Charité Hospital the fateful Wolfgang Wohlgemuth. Otto soon learned to know the comrade of his future eastward flight by his pet name, Wowo.

John's peace feelers were received with considerable suspicion by the Allies, especially since he was unwilling at this time to name any conspirators. On 20 February 1943 the British intelligence service issued from London a statement to the effect that the Abwehr or the Gestapo was possibly inspiring his activities as a deception. He persisted, however, using as intermediary Juan Terraza, one of the principal diplomatic secretaries in the Spanish Foreign Office and a close friend of Louis Ferdinand. His attentions were directed

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Dr. John

toward Graham of the British Embassy in Lisbon and Willard L. Beaulac of the American Embassy in Madrid. Beaulac, on instructions from Assistant Secretary of State Acheson, saw John at his home but made no commitments. He, too, was dubious of his sincerity.

John's sincerity as a representative of the military element of the resistance, a role he was soon to assume, is in fact questionable. He was a dissenter among dissenters, thoroughly disliking the generals and never believing they would act against Hitler. He considered the military component of the 20 July group very weak and continually warned against it.

As 1943 wore along, his approaches became more definite. In December he told his British contact in Madrid that he represented an internal opposition group consisting of industrialists, trade union leaders, churchmen, and generals, all strongly anti-Nazi and anti-USSR. He ticked off names and disclosed details of another plot to murder Hitler.⁴ In February 1944 he again came to Madrid ostensibly on Abwehr business. This time he said he was remaining in Spain as a representative of the anti-Nazi generals. As cover he assumed the directorship of the sister Lufthansa company there.

He later told the British that he performed no Abwehr missions on his trips to Spain. In early June 1944, however, the British ascertained that he had transmitted information concerning Allied military intentions to Berlin. The nature of this information is not known; it was probably innocuous. In any case the British and American embassies in Madrid, for their part, got valuable data from him—on the results of Allied bombings of Berlin, the German V-bomb and its launching bases, and the experimental station at Peenemuende.

The current of events leading to the ill-fated Generals' Coup was now quickening. Shortly after the Allied invasion of Normandy in June, John consulted in Madrid with Col. Georg Hansen, who as Canaris' successor at the head of the Abwehr was prospectively a chief negotiator with the Allies, specifi-

⁴At about this time the report that John was a British agent being handled by Major F. Landsdale and Cmdr. A. Fuller of the British Embassy in Lisbon was conveyed from the Portuguese General Staff to a German Lt. Col. von Auenrode (alias Karschof), who in turn informed Admiral Canaris. Canaris, of course, took no action.

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cally General Eisenhower at SHAEF, once the revolt had succeeded. In early July he made arrangements that any message from the conspirators would be passed immediately from the American Embassy in Madrid to General Eisenhower. At the same time he learned, to the dismay of the conspirators, that the Western Allies would not consider negotiating a separate peace, and that the British and Americans would probably make no effort to get to Berlin ahead of the Russians.⁵

There is conflicting evidence about his activities at the time of the attempted coup itself. According to his own story, he was called to Berlin to confirm in person his bad news of the unresponsiveness of the Western Allies, and arrived at Tempelhof Airdrome on 19 July. He was at OKW Headquarters in the Bendlerstrasse on the afternoon of 20 July when Col. Klaus von Stauffenberg arrived from East Prussia to report that the bomb had gone off and Hitler could be assumed dead. He worked with the conspirators there until 9:30 that evening, when it became evident that this attempt on Hitler's life had also failed, pro-Nazi officers were regaining control, and conspirators were being summarily executed in the courtyard. The next morning, according to his account, Johannes Popitz' daughter told him of her father's arrest, and he went into hiding. He escaped to Madrid on 24 July by signing on as a mechanic on a Lufthansa manifest.⁶

John's story, however, is contradicted by the lists of applicants for Spanish visas and travel manifests from Aerodrome del Prat del Llobregat. They show him arriving in Barcelona from Madrid via Lufthansa on 18 July and not departing for Berlin until 22 July. Allied intelligence regarded the variant embellishments of his account as probable fabrications and was inclined to suspect that Otto credited himself with activi-

⁵ Ritter, *op. cit.*, p. 282. The ultimate source is John himself.

⁶ That John was one of the pathetically few rebels to escape has been cited to support a theory that he was a Gestapo agent infiltrated into the conspiracy. We have noted that he was out of sympathy with the generals, and he seems not to have been intimately associated with any resistance circle except Louis Ferdinand's; but the Gestapo theory is untenable. He would hardly have betrayed his beloved brother Hans. Moreover, two SS aids of Walter Schellenberg later testified that the Gestapo had partially penetrated the 20 July group, but not through Otto John.

ties rightly belonging to Hans. One MI-6 interrogator remarked that John seemed to change the story to keep from boring himself.

At any rate he turned up in late July or early August in Madrid, where he lived in a hotel some three weeks.

[REDACTED]

On 25 August they smuggled him to Lisbon and hid him at a safehouse, the Boa Vista, which was also used by Spanish Communists. On 23 October the Portuguese police raided this house and arrested John, the housekeeper Romero, and seven of the Spanish Communists.⁷

John was jailed for several days at Caxias. Then the Portuguese General Staff overruled the police and turned him over to the British. He was flown to the UK on 3 November, accompanied by Cmdr. Fuller, his contact at the British Embassy in Lisbon.

In the British Victor's Service

On John's arrival in the UK there was a wartime snafu as to his identity, and he was interned as a high-ranking Nazi. According to his own story, Churchill at this time called him in for a consultation that lasted half the night. He was released from internment and transferred to the Political Intelligence Department of the Political Warfare Executive on 11 December. He was turned over to Sefton Delmer, a top reporter for the London *Daily Express* and later for the *Times*, who was wartime director of the Morale Branch of PID. According to Delmer, John lived with him for 10 months. Delmer is another person who will reappear before this drama is acted out.

In 1945 and 1946 John worked for the British in various capacities—with PID on intelligence matters, on the POW re-orientation program at Wilton Park, and on research for [REDACTED]

⁷ There are diverse accounts of this episode. One intelligence version has it that John was arrested because of his friendship for Professor Egaz Morriz, frequently referred to in Portugal as the unofficial Soviet ambassador. *Der Spiegel*, ten years later, said that he was arrested as a homosexual. Another section of the German press insisted that he was arrested at a fiesta when he got into a brawl over a woman.

Dr. John

[REDACTED] A tally of John's fellow-Germans [REDACTED]—Dr. Honigmann, Eberhard Koebel, Karl von Schnitzler, and Putlitz, the agent-baron discharged by the OWI—is intriguing: all of them, like John, were later to decamp to the East Zone of Germany.

After the surrender in May 1945, John did not return to Germany with the bulk of the political exiles. He was working for the British War and Foreign Offices, interrogating German generals in the Kensington cage, and helping prepare legal documents for the approaching Nuremberg trials. At Nuremberg he worked as an adviser to the UK prosecution staff, a fact omitted in his own curriculum vitae.

Up to this time he could lay valid claim to being a German patriot. The cause which met catastrophe on 20 July had been a worthy one, that of revolt against the Nazis, not treason to the German nation. Its watchword was, "Against Hitler, for Germany." But when he returned for the Nuremberg trials, it was in effect as a German in British battle dress. He revisited with the wrath of a prosecutor the country which he had fled as a political persecutee. He kept aloof from other Germans working at the trials, attempted to conceal his identity and purpose, and spent his free time with his British colleagues, trying unsuccessfully to pose as an Englishman doing historical research in the documents of the Tribunal. The spirit of the trials themselves, in which righteous indignation at the Nazi horrors was not untainted by thirst for political vengeance, may have contributed further to the warping of John's character.

He was already showing psychoneurotic tendencies. In 1946 in London he attended a private War Office showing of a film on the Belzen concentration camp. Shortly after the movie, he told an intelligence officer five years later, the lower part of his face began to discharge a pus-like fluid and he suffered a species of nervous breakdown. His explanation was that the movie brought home to him the terrible failure of the 20 July revolt and all it stood for; he had been condemned to virtual inactivity since his flight to the UK and the accumulated frustration was simply too much for him. John clearly identified himself closely with the failure of the anti-Hitler

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resistance and had a strong guilt complex deriving probably from his brother's painful death. This reinforced his obsession with the July affair and his inability to compromise with anything remotely identifiable with Nazis, right-wing politicians, or German military traditions. His excessive drinking and other manifestations of emotional instability would be symptomatic of such a state of mind.

He may have had woman-trouble, too. In 1949, after practicing law in London for a year, he married Frau Lucy-Marleen Mankiewitz, the *mother* of the girl he had been expected to wed. His new wife, a German Jewess whose father was an old friend and adviser of Dr. Theodor Heuss, taught Wagnerian singing at Hampstead. She has been described as making up in charm and intellect for the greater beauty of her jilted daughter Gisela, with whom John had worked in a wartime British operation.

John's mistress, Frau Elsa Mueller Rudolph in Wiesbaden, the widow of a German pilot killed in action in 1943, was another who stood to be offended by this marriage. John wrote in explanation that he was marrying an older woman because of his need for balance, and moreover his bride had important political connections in the new Germany through her family. He hoped that he and Elsa could remain friends. They did. It was Elsa who, as nearly as can be ascertained, enlarged Otto's circle of acquaintances to include Ian Eland, [REDACTED] who was later helpful in exposing and eliminating one of John's rivals for the presidency of the Verfassungsschutzamt.

In the fall of 1949, no longer trying to conceal his services to the UK, John became openly the chief German assistant to the British prosecution at the trial of General von Manstein in Hamburg. This time he apparently associated with the German lawyers defending Von Manstein. But he irked the defense, it is said, by deliberately twisting facts and evidence to the advantage of the prosecutors, many of whom relied heavily on him because of their unfamiliarity with the German language and with the organization and practices of the Nazi Reich. Several friends implored him at this time to get out of the business of delivering his countrymen to the Allied hangman, and their warning that he was alienating

himself from his fatherland must have increased his emotional stresses.

John was not doing awfully well financially in the UK. He was employed by the London solicitors James Brodie & Company on reparation and restitution cases, but he could not base a career on claims arising out of a past era. He suffered from the lack of the British citizenship that had been extended to Putlitz and certain other Germans. (At times he claimed that he had declined a proffered citizenship.) Germany, on the other hand, was getting back on her feet economically.

During 1949 and 1950 he made several trips to Germany to see friends in the Bonn government about a job. Jakob Kaiser, whom he had known as a leader of the Catholic trade union resistance, offered him one in his Ministry of All-German Affairs, but John declined on the ground that he deserved a higher rank than Ministerialrat. Foreign Affairs had no place for him because, he suspected, of his "anti-German" activities in the UK and his role at the trials. He also tried unsuccessfully for an appointment on the German delegation to the International Ruhr Authority.

The Protector of the Constitution

In 1950 West Germany was passing through the interim stage on the road from occupation to sovereignty, and an important question was that of preserving ideological rectitude in the new state. The French did not want it to have any political police. The British favored an adaptation of Scotland Yard. The United States came up with an emasculated FBI plan. The Germans wanted to return to the pre-Hitler scheme, incorporating the political police as Branch 1A into the national police. The eventual compromise was the watery conception of an Office for the Protection of the Constitution, a police force with no power to arrest. It was supposed to be a silent security service keeping tabs on the lunatic fringes to the right and left.

How was it that Otto John, a man who already showed signs of needing watching himself, almost an expatriate, whom Chancellor Adenauer is said to have disliked from first sight, was named head of the sensitive Bundesamt fuer Verfassungsschutz? Or, as the Germans put it in their rough peasant

proverb, "Who put the goat in charge of the garden?" As assets he had an influential friend in Jakob Kaiser, his connections by marriage with President Heuss, and most importantly the gratitude of the British for his work for them during the war and in the Nazi trials.

And it was not an easy job to fill, with its international political implications. The German proposal to appoint a non-political civil servant was vetoed by the Allied High Commissioners. The United States suggested an excellent man in Fabian von Schlabrendorff, but he refused on grounds of ill health. The French nominated Colonel Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz, information chief in the embryo defense ministry, but John disposed of this rival by having Ian Eland, his mistress' agent friend, put the finger on Heinz as the source of his espionage reports [REDACTED]. Finally, after 15 months, 12 rejected nominees, and 10 wrangling sessions of the High Commission, the British quietly sponsored Otto John, for bad luck the thirteenth man.

The German lawyers who had defended Von Manstein and the Nuremberg accused were shocked. They complained to Minister of the Interior Heinemann that John was unscrupulous and altogether a bad choice. Heinemann replied that the British trusted John, and anyway the job was unimportant: Germany was in no position to keep secrets from the occupation powers.

U.S. approval was another Gordian knot. On 22 November 1950 High Commissioner McCloy cabled the Department of State from Frankfurt that the Federal Republic had requested HICOG to approve John's candidacy with all possible urgency, and that only the results of the Department's name check were needed to clear the way. A week later, at 1800 Washington time, 29 November, a cable over Dean Acheson's signature informed Frankfurt that conflicting information regarding Otto John "necessitates thorough investigation by Army G-2 of other sources. Results follow soonest." But on 1 December, at 0909, McCloy wired back:

On basis of excellent data available here and in absence of any derogatory information and in view of urgency of making a decision and after approval by British and French, we approved appointment of Otto John on 29 November, prior to receipt of your telegram of 29 November.

The newly installed BfV president was again the center of discussions by the Allied Directorate when, on 7 March 1951, they took up the appointment of Vera Schwart, formerly a secretary of Admiral Canaris, as John's secretary. The United States and the UK raised no objections. But the French did, on the grounds that Vera, arrested by the Soviets in 1946, had turned informer for them the following year. The glandular dislike of French intelligence for John had been reflected in the comment of a Sureté chief on his appointment: he had exclaimed, in chorus with a Turkish colleague, "C'est impossible!"

Just how impossible a choice John was became increasingly apparent. Aside from his instability and his emotional political outlook, he was a poor administrator and lacked balanced judgment. U.S. intelligence saw him muddling through without the energy, imagination, or administrative ability to put the BfV on its feet. He had no patience with the painstaking detail necessary to effective intelligence operations. He was intrigued by special missions and fanciful projects which usually wound up putting the Office and the government in embarrassing, not to say ridiculous, positions.

One of the score of projects John laid on was Operation Maerchenwald. The good fairy of this Fabulous Wood was a buxom widow named Frau Baumann from Ansbach in Bavaria, confessed guardian of a vast Nazi treasure trove from which she was supposed to make monthly withdrawals to support indigent Nazi leaders in Switzerland and South America. The cache was somewhere in the Bavarian Alps, sometimes at the bottom of a lake, a very deep lake, the Frau said. John, taking her at her word, dispatched six green-jacketed BfV men to escort her to the treasure. She took them up into the Tyrolean mountains, where, according to an official report, she found the right blazed tree and the secret path of white pebbles, but was unable to find the stone slab covering the lever that opened the way to the cache.

While John was waiting in his Cologne command post for his men to report the find, U.S. operatives came to see him and showed him documents proving that his good fairy was a swindler, blackmail artist, public nuisance, and congenital liar, once inmate of an insane asylum. Nevertheless John

summoned Frau Baumann to Cologne to reveal more details. Somewhat drunk, he had a two-hour seance with her.

By mid-1952 Bonn was rocking with gossip about his antics. Report after report reaching Adenauer's desk indicated that in his hatred of the Nazis John was not alert to the Communist danger, that he maintained relations with Communist sympathizers, that he was given to fits of melancholy brooding, and that he was increasingly taking to drink. But the Chancellor had no intention of lowering the boom on him until Germany achieved her sovereignty.

The BfV's serious operations were apparently in the hands of its de facto director, former General Staff officer Albert Radke. He was a close associate of General Reinhard Gehlen, who had headed the wartime General Staff's section for evaluating Eastern intelligence and in postwar Germany bossed a high-powered unofficial offensive espionage group. Gehlen distrusted John because of his record of defection to the British.

John's four years in office were extremely unpleasant. He was resented by senior police officials and other German civil servants as an outsider, as a stooge of his British sponsors, and as one who had deserted Germany in her hour of need. Rumors were growing that his days in the BfV were numbered, that his office would be replaced by Gehlen's organization. He may have brooded most over this prospect of being supplanted by Gehlen, whom he regarded as one of the military group responsible for the failure of the 1944 coup and so for Hans' death by torture.

In May and June of 1954 he enjoyed the pleasant interlude of a trip to the United States. He was brought to Washington and shown the courtesies normally accorded the head of a foreign intelligence service. CIA officials dined him, and on 7 June he was briefed on general intelligence matters.

Details in a Defection

John returned to the Federal Republic in fine fettle. Dr. Wohlgemuth, however, who visited him in Cologne on 9 July, insisted he appeared run down and prescribed pills. John, rather than argue about it, took them without visible effect, though later he tried to use this incident in his defense. On 8 and again on 12 July he was visited by Michael Winch, a

discredited British-Soviet double agent. The subject of their conversations is not known. Frau John, who happened to be in Cologne, objected to Winch, probably because he was cadging meals and money.

John's twelve-year-old relationship with Wohlgemuth had been a matter of concern for some time. [REDACTED] is reported to have warned him twice about friend Wowo, first in March 1953 and again in July 1954. After the first warning John is said to have detailed a BfV man, Von Berge, to watch him for a while, and on the second occasion to have given an "embarrassed" and conflicting account of his contacts with him. Before John's visit to the United States, a Berlin shopkeeper, Frau Anneliese Schroeder, showed police notes of a conversation with one Helmut Salewski, a close friend of Wohlgemuth's. Salewski told her Wowo kept a tape recorder hidden in his room and persuaded John to talk about secret matters when he visited him for evenings of women and drinking.

On 15 July the Johns flew to West Berlin for the services commemorating the decennial of the 20 July revolt. Beginning with a reception given by Oberburgmeister Reuter on the evening of 18 July, families and friends of the participants in the plot against the Nazi regime met for the purpose of unveiling a monument to the victims in the courtyard of the former OKW in the Bendlerstrasse. John and his wife took advantage of this opportunity to dine twice with his old school friend of Wiesbaden days, Wolfgang Hoffer, now a captain in the American CIC. Hoffer said that the Americans regarded John as a British agent, and that he himself couldn't stand the CIC any longer and wanted John to help him locate a job in Germany. He wanted nothing more to do with intelligence services.

An intelligence officer who spent considerable time with John during this convocation said he "lamented several times about the bad things people were saying about him and about attacks against him coming from Minister Robert Lehr and Herr Sauer. Shortly before he left Bonn to attend the Berlin festivities, he was called into [State Secretary] Ritter von Lex's office and was told they had just received a complaint from the Federal Chancellery accusing him of secretly join-

ing the SPD. John said he was sick and tired of these rumors, and if a good opportunity presents itself he would seriously consider rejoining the Deutsche Lufthansa when it starts functioning again.”⁸

In this mood he came upon a newspaper account of how Minister of the Interior Schroeder, his superior, planned drastic changes in the BfV as soon as West Germany obtained its sovereignty. He was reported to appear visibly shaken. At the commemorative exercises he made an exhibition of himself, sobbing loudly and denouncing two other mourners as Gestapo agents. Although the memories evoked of Hans' death ten years earlier were undoubtedly depressing, he had always been jovial and friendly at the memorial services of previous years.

Immediately after the ceremonies John declined to dine with his old friend Prince Louis Ferdinand, saying that he was meeting with some East Zone people.

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John kept an engagement, however, with an elderly German couple, in-laws of an American acquaintance, at his hotel. In this interval between the memorial exercises in the Bendlerstrasse and his appointment with Wohlgemuth, he also saw Bonde-Henriksen, correspondent for the Danish paper *Berlingske Tidende*, the man who after eighteen months was to help him return from East Germany, and apparently expected to have a drink with him later in the evening.

A perhaps equivocal indication of his intention to come back that night was the fact that when he changed clothes he left papers and notes from his pockets in his hotel room. But he also had reservations for a return flight from Berlin, and his desk calendar in Cologne showed a future schedule of normal activities. Driving from his hotel, he stopped in at the Maison de France, a restaurant near Wohlgemuth's downtown office, in order, according to Erich Ollenhauer, to pick up there an answer to a proposal he had made Mendes-France that the

⁸ Lufthansa would not have taken him.

Federal Republic's remilitarization plans be exposed to debate at the forthcoming Geneva Conference. The answer was not there.

For John's meeting and movements with Wohlgemuth the evidence consisted until recently mainly of his own account given after redefection, which begins by omitting these known preliminary activities, emphasizes a suspicious cup of coffee served him at the Wohlgemuth apartment, and ends in a theatrical invented scene wherein he awakens from a drugged sleep in an abandoned house and is threatened by Communists speaking with a Russian accent. But there were three important facts from other sources. Item one, Wohlgemuth telephoned the Charité Hospital in East Berlin that evening and said, "I shall come now with my good friend." Item two, he apparently intended, like John, to come back: he left in West Berlin his 10 suits of clothes, four apartments, five mistresses, and third wife. Later we shall look at other evidence of Wohlgemuth's intent made public in 1958 by the release of testimony given at John's treason trial. Item three, the customs officer on duty at the Sandkrug Bridge that night, Ernst Richard Hanke, who halted Wohlgemuth's sedan at the border, peered inside and saw that both occupants were awake and alert. When Hanke pointed out that the vehicle was about to enter the Soviet sector, a man of John's description replied, "Aber dort wollen wir doch hin—Well, that's where we want to go."

The Bonn Government insisted that John must have been abducted. They offered a reward of DM500,000 for conclusive information. A special Bundestag committee was established to investigate the affair. A variant on the abduction explanation was given by a U.S. intelligence cable:

John was a damned fool caught in a well-baited trap. . . . He very likely overestimated his own position to the extent of believing that the Soviets would not dare harm him. He took and miscalculated a risk in pursuit of bait set by persons who evaluated correctly his psychology and his desire to score a major personal coup following heavy attacks on his office in recent Bundestag debates.

The suicide on 23 July of Otto's friend Hoffer, who had believed that the German secret police supposedly guarding John had actually been holding him under arrest, made the

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mystery a double one. John claimed, in a statement broadcast from East Berlin, that his friend had been driven to desperation by the CIC's insistence that he spy on him. Part of the German press said that Hoffer killed himself rather than face an inevitable investigation. The U.S. Army officially denied that he had been detailed to check up on John or on Wohlgemuth. U.S. intelligence had him feeling that the defection of his life-long friend shattered his whole intelligence career.

The British, publicly at any rate, stood by John. They denied on 5 August that any British official had been the source of an Associated Press story to the effect that they had dropped John ten months earlier; they considered such a report to be "skillful sabotage." John continued to have a surprisingly good British press,

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At the other extreme were those who believed, on the grounds of John's vulnerability and associations, that he might have long since become a Soviet agent; and these included [REDACTED]

c. At least there were reports pointing to possible Communist pressures and preparation. Baron Wolfgang von und zu Putlitz, who first boasted and then denied having engineered the defection of Burgess and MacLean and who urged John on 16 March 1953 that he at least confer with a Soviet officer about saving Germany from being caught in an East-West conflict, visited Bonn in the spring of 1954 and again in July, and on at least one of these occasions he met with John. Informed circles in East Berlin were reported in August to consider John's defection and that of the Bundestag deputy Karl Franz Schmidt-Wittmack to have been masterminded by Soviet General Ivan A. Serov and run from KGB headquarters in Karlshorst.⁹ And a refugee who had worked

⁹ Peter Deriabin says that at the time of his own defection in September 1953 Soviet State Security was building up a file on John's dealings with the Nazis, and he suggests John was blackmailed into defecting by the Soviet threat to expose his pro-Nazi activities! (*The Secret World*, p. 197.)

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for the East German Security Service claimed later to have heard Colonel Beater of the Service remark that two of his agents, Axel and Peter (the Rittwagens) were preparing in West Berlin for the defection or, if necessary, the abduction of Otto John, and that Beater had met at least once with Wohlgemuth and with Wolfgang Hoffer of the CIC.

Except to doggedly suspicious minds the baited-trap, drug-abduction, long-time-agent, and fleeing-wrongdoer theories were disproved and the main mysteries of the case cleared up by John's public appearance and a private conversation on 11 August. At a conference attended by 400 Western and Communist reporters in the East Berlin press building on Friedrichstrasse, he said that the West German government had become a mere instrument of American European policy, which was using Chancellor Adenauer to renazify and remilitarize Germany as a spearhead against the USSR, that there were secret clauses in the EDC treaty in this connection, that Adenauer and the militarists regarded the EDC as an interim device for restoring German military hegemony in Europe, that the Gehlen organization had stepped up its activities in France to this end, and that the Americans, in their hysterical fear of Communism, were preparing a new Hitler Crusade against the East that would leave Germany a mass of atomic ashes.

These standard theses of the Communist propaganda line were probably consonant with John's own anti-Nazi and anti-military obsession, reinforced in recent months by his growing feeling of being not appreciated in West Germany and not wanted in the government, even deliberately persecuted under the influence of the neo-Nazis. And if he felt guilt over his earlier desertion to the British, he could now choose the anti-Nazi East and still remain on German soil rather than "flee for a second time," as he later told the Danish correspondent Henrik Bonde-Henriksen.

After the press conference John had a 45-minute talk over glasses of beer with Gaston Coblenz of the New York *Herald Tribune* and two London paper correspondents, Karl Robson of the *News Chronicle* and his one-time boss and benefactor Sefton Delmer of the *Daily Express*. They were joined at the table in a private dining room of the press building by four

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Communist members of the Council for German Unity, but these made no attempt to control the conversation. They did not need to, the three Western correspondents agreed: John was saying of his own volition what they would have sought to have him say. The three gave him many opportunities to indicate by some sign that he was being held against his will, but although the talk around the table was going in several directions and it would have been easy, he did not do so.

John reiterated that he had crossed over voluntarily because of his long-smoldering unhappiness about renazification in West Germany. In reply to a question about Dr. Wohlgemuth's role, he said it was relatively unimportant—"he only established my contact with the Communist regime." John substantiated the theory that he had not intended to remain in the Soviet Zone when he drove across the Sandkrug Bridge with Wowo. Asked whether he had decided in advance to stay, he replied: "No. My decision was made only after my talks with the Communist authorities. I came over to confirm that I would be able to stay on my terms. I was able to do so. I would have been free to return if I had wanted to."

John's motives do at this point seem understandable, and the main course of events clear. But as late as November 1958, perhaps because the picture was again confused by re-defection, a senior U.S. intelligence officer in Germany was of the opinion that, "barring an unforeseeable stroke of good fortune, we doubt that we shall ever know the true circumstances which prompted Otto John's appearance in East Berlin."

The Way Back

Shortly after his arrival in East Germany, John was reported to have made contact with Dr. Erich Correns, head of the National Front, and to have prepared for the Ministry of Interior a list of some 50 West German government officials possibly susceptible to defection inducements. On 14 August the West Berlin *Telegraf* reported his suggesting that former Field Marshal Friedrich von Paulus, who surrendered the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad, head a committee to "unveil the aggressive machinations of the National Socialist circles in West Germany."

A few weeks later, the East German government announced plans for a Ministry for German Unity to be headed by John. Its proposed purpose was to establish contact with persons in West German public life who were opposed to the Bonn government and thus encourage their opposition or provide them with an incentive to defect. The ministry never materialized, although John wrote to a number of prominent West German politicians urging them to take a stand against the U.S.-Adenauer policies.

On 19 September 1954 John was reported to be working on the All-German Committee of the East Zone government and also on the German Committee sponsored by the GDR Press and Information Office. It was learned later that he spent several weeks that fall in the USSR. Reports received in December 1954 indicated that he was planning to establish permanent residence in Leipzig, that he was working with the new East German Lufthansa, and that he was making preparations for a propaganda offensive to re-establish a constitutional monarchy in Germany and would soon make overtures to Prince Louis Ferdinand.

In March 1955 it was learned that he had been appointed permanent adviser to the National Council of the National Front and was touring the Soviet zone in official capacity, attending conferences of regional committees and issuing special directives for conducting anti-West propaganda. Late in October he was reported to be editor of a new publication, the *Berliner Politische Korrespondenz*, directed against the policies of the Bonn government and intended mainly for dissemination in West Berlin and the Federal Republic. He was also reported to be writing memoirs.

But there had already been indications that John, disappointed with East Germany and with having been given only the position of "itinerant preacher for reunification," as he wrote his wife, was toying with the idea of returning to the West. This was the implication of a statement he made to Bonde-Henriksen in June 1955 that he was free to leave at any moment but hesitated because of fear of being arrested in West Germany. In a three-hour interview with the Danish correspondent, John said he would not have stayed on in East Germany if he thought the USSR desired war. Henrik-

sen remarked, "It is a question of whether you would have been permitted to say 'Goodbye and thanks,'" and John replied, "I guess I would have known ways and means . . ." He concluded the interview by saying: "I am a human being with the shortcomings and virtues of a human being. I can be accused of many things, but I have not failed the ideals of my youth. You may call me naive. Nevertheless, I am realistic and developments will prove me right."

In less than six months, however; perhaps particularly moved by a message from Prince Louis to the effect that if John really believed the things he was saying he could no longer be his friend, John arranged with Bonde-Henriksen to be picked up on Unter den Linden in front of the University at 1650 hours on 12 December 1955. At about 1635 he entered the University from Dorotheenstrasse, telling his two guards to wait at the gate since he had an appointment there. The guards let him go in alone. He walked through the buildings to where Henriksen was parked, waiting. Partially disguised in a muffler and dark glasses, he drove with Henriksen in the car bearing the Danish coat of arms through the Brandenburg Gate to the Victory Column and then to Tempelhof Air-drome.

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Bonde-Henriksen and Wiechmann from the regional BfV office flew with him to Wahn. From there he was driven to Bonn.

Post Mortem

His fears of being arrested after his defection were soon confirmed. He was charged on 18 January 1956 with treasonable conspiracy and high treason for his East Zone activities. His defense was that he thought it less damaging to West Germany, once he found himself in Communist hands through the drug-abduction routine, if he pretended to cooperate; if he refused, he would be brainwashed and forced to reveal state secrets of importance. He contended that he had had no chance to speak freely with Sefton Delmer and the other Western correspondents at his 11 August press conference or to convey any hint to anyone during the entire eighteen months that he was acting under compulsion.

The court was unimpressed. After a painstaking review of all the circumstances he was found guilty on two counts of treasonable conspiracy for his services to Eastern propaganda organizations. He was acquitted of betraying state secrets, but judged guilty of treasonable falsifications that would have been secret if true—his allegation of secret clauses in the EDC treaty and of activities of the Gehlen organization aimed at European hegemony. Sentenced to four years' imprisonment, he was released in July 1958 under an amnesty granted by President Heuss.

Wohlgemuth was brought to trial on treason charges but acquitted on 14 December 1958 by the West German Supreme Court. The court proceedings in the Wohlgemuth case have not yet been released, but the publication in 1958 of the official *Urteil* from the trial of Otto John¹⁰ confirms the general outline of both men's motivations and actions drawn above and fills in some details.

The testimony of witnesses established that by the spring of 1954 John had become so apprehensive about attacks on him and his Office that he secured the promise of a legal position with an industrial firm against eventualities. It was clear to the court also that he had been genuinely, if unjustifiably, troubled by the idea that National Socialism might regain political power in Bonn. His political thinking, if somewhat vague, was certainly oriented toward the West and away from totalitarian forms of government. He distrusted military men, opposed remilitarization, and was shocked by the very thought of another war.

Witnesses pictured him as almost pathologically disturbed during his July visit to Berlin. He was convinced that the newspaper story of changes planned by the Interior Minister was aimed at him. At a lunch on 17 July, when someone remarked that only a war could resolve the current tension, he "shot up out of his chair." At the BfV Berlin office that afternoon he went to pieces, complaining with half-drunken vehemence about the lack of confidence in him. On 19 July

¹⁰ *Hochverrat und Staatsgejaerdung*, Band II (Karlsruhe: C. F. Mueller, 1958), pp. 77-150. The *Urteil* includes an exhaustive and impartial summary of the evidence and arguments of both prosecution and defense.

at lunch he bemoaned the "growing influence of the Nazis" and went into a long reminiscence of the Third Reich and his own misunderstood role at Nuremberg. The memorial service on 20 July had an extraordinarily shattering effect on him.

With respect to any premeditation of his 20 July defection it was testified that he had booked a return flight to Cologne for 22 July, that he had refused his secretary's request for use of the official car on 21 July on the grounds that he would need it himself, that he told his chauffeur after dinner on 20 July that he was through with the car for the day but would call for it in the morning, and that as he left the hotel for the last time, although a clerk told him his wife was in the lobby, he did not say goodbye to her. His frequent letters to her from the East Zone referred again and again to his "sudden" decision and entreated her for understanding.

There was evidence also that the East German security service was unprepared for John's appearance in the East Zone and uncertain about his motives: a West German woman journalist whom it had imprisoned two years earlier on espionage charges and whom it supposed knew a good deal about John was brought before one of its officers in Halle just after 20 July and questioned as to whether she thought John's defection bona fide. Another West German journalist was told by John himself, in complete privacy on 13 May 1955, that the "number two Russian" in Karlshorst to whom he had offered his collaboration on 20 July was surprised, but made a kind of gentleman's agreement not to demand any secrets from him and to let him move about freely.

The testimony did not touch on the Hoffer mystery except to show that John had been inflating a jest of Hoffer's when he claimed the CIC had made him spy on him. From the bits of evidence available here it appears likely that Hoffer was disillusioned with intelligence intrigues, had made some indiscreet contacts in East Germany, and was afraid that his friend's defection would bring on an interrogation and exposure. John's attempt to blame his suicide on the CIC probably reflected a feeling of guilt for it on his own part.

Wohlgemuth, who did not make himself available as a witness, was pictured in the testimony as politically far to the

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left, announcing to all and sundry his conviction that Communism would come to power in western Europe within a few years. Nevertheless he had apparently not engaged in any legally actionable activities. With respect to his intentions in driving John across the Sandkrug Bridge, it was testified that when the two men left the office-apartment after the end of the Doctor's office hours that night, he was still wearing his white trousers and carrying only a trench coat, and that in the wee hours of 21 July he came back, alone, very much upset, and dashed to and fro through the house hastily packing a trunk.

He told the night nurse that John, whom he had introduced to some people in the East Zone, had unexpectedly decided to remain there, and that he himself might be suspected of wrongdoing and was therefore going back to stay at the Charité until things quieted down. He left a note for the day nurse to the same effect, and told her to take care of the office and apartment. Between 4 and 5 a.m. he telephoned his attorney, gave him the same excited account, and asked him to take full powers over his property. Then he went to his mistress' house in Lietzenburger street, where he maintained a one-room apartment, and called her down to the street. Telling her what had happened, he suggested that his apartment might be searched and asked her to remove his camera, photographs, films, and books. At about five o'clock he stopped at the Uhland garage for gasoline, where the attendant noticed that he seemed to be in "even a bigger hurry than usual."

None of these people informed the police or Frau John, however, who first got from intelligence sources the news of John's probable defection, confirmed on 23 July by his own announcement over the East German radio:

. . . I have taken a resolute step and made contact with the East Germans. I have been deprived of any basis for political activity in the Federal Republic. After I had been continually heckled in my office by the Nazis again rampant everywhere in political and even in public life, the Federal Minister of the Interior has now made any further work in my official position impossible for me by declaring to the press that with the coming of sovereignty he would have a free hand and be able "to entrust the protection of the constitution to persons who are truly above suspicion." . . . German policy has run into a

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blind alley . . . yet there is still a possibility of reunification. . . . I shall soon present my ideas and plans for German reunification to the German public.

Some students of the case are still convinced, in spite of the apparent adequacy of John's personal motivation, that he must nevertheless have defected under Soviet or more likely British control. To them the case can but remain a mystery; for although acquaintances like Winch, Putlitz, and Wohlge-muth may well have encouraged John's own obsessions, no evidence has come to light on how a supposed definitive control was exercised, and it is difficult to arrive even at a per-suasive theoretical reconstruction of British or Soviet purposes consistent with the facts.

It seemed evident to the court, as it does to a reader of the intelligence files, that John's decision to approach the Communist authorities in the East Zone, made in a state of heightened neurotic tension and perhaps alcoholic befuddle-ment, derived from his frustration in what he considered his mission to stem the renazification of Germany and was precipitated by the imminent likelihood of his losing what position and influence he still had in the Federal Republic. When his initial Soviet contacts in Karlshorst led him, it seems probable, to believe he would be free of duress in the East and might be able to accomplish there what he could not in the West, he forthwith made his marriage of conven-ience with the Communists, in which any real position and influence yet escaped him and from which he eventually opted to return to his Western wife and friends.