

# SPYING FOR LOVE:

## East Germany's Romeo Agents and their Western Victims

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It was a sweltering summer evening in the West German capital of Bonn in 1977. As Gabriele Kliem, a 32-year old translator and interpreter at the American embassy, was relaxing on the banks of the river Rhine, a tall, blond, blue-eyed man approached her, introduced himself as a friend of a friend and invited her for dinner. “He looked like my dream man,” Kliem recalled, and the seemingly casual encounter resulted in a passionate affair. It also led to several years of espionage. Her lover, whose real name was Frank Dietzel, worked for East Germany’s foreign intelligence service, the Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung (HVA), and enticed the smitten Kliem to steal reams of sensitive information from the American embassy.

Dietzel was an East German “Romeo agent.” The brainchild of HVA director Markus Wolf, the Romeos began operating in the 1950s based on the dual observation that many single secretaries in Bonn had access to key information, and that World War II had left West Germany with a shortage of eligible men. “This gap in the market we helped fill with eligible bachelors of our own,” recalled Wolf.

Leaving nothing to chance, the East Germans planned each step of the operations meticulously. After determining who might be ripe for romantic involvement, the HVA carefully drew a psychological profile of the woman, then matched her with a promising suitor (in Kliem’s case, the East Germans had learned that she had previously been in love with a blond, blue-eyed math teacher). Next came a chance encounter, followed by wining, dining and, ultimately, sex. In at least one case, the HVA even arranged a fake marriage ceremony to commit a woman to her Romeo. When the target was won over emotionally, the Romeo sought to recruit her as a spy. To overcome her moral scruples, he would typically make the pitch under a false flag, pretending to gather information for a friendly intelligence service or another nonthreatening organization. Dietzel told Kliem he was a physicist working for an international research company committed to world peace.

During the course of the Cold War, the HVA managed some 35 Romeos in West Germany. The damage they caused was immense. Many of their girlfriends worked for key Western institutions, and one even rose to a senior level in West German intelligence. However, when counterintelligence caught up with them—as inevitably happened after the fall of the Berlin Wall—the end was brutal. Many women had no inkling that their partners had bedded them merely on orders from East Berlin. As it turned out, several Romeos even had a family of their own back in the East. “To him, I was just a tool,” Kliem remarked sadly after discovering her lover’s true identity. She was convicted of espionage in 1996. Dietzel died in a car-crash before her trial.

The Romeos usually fared better. As East German citizens, they could not be tried for treason. And even today, many remain mostly unembarrassed about their past. As one of them noted crisply: “I always stuck to the party line and did what I was supposed to do. And it was fun.”

