

**Historical Research Note:
Incapacitating Agents and the East German
Ministry for State Security (“Stasi”)**

Jonathan B. Tucker

Summary

During the late 1980s, a few years before the the German Democratic Republic ceased to exist, the East German Ministry for State Security (MfS) developed and produced small amounts of a chemical incapacitating agent for operational use designated “R-8.” Research in the archives of the MfS has identified some reports on the development of this agent, but its chemical structure and physiological effects remain unknown.

Background

The East German Ministry for State Security (MfS, better known as the “Stasi”) played a key role in maintaining the Communist dictatorship of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). A vast bureaucracy with some 91,000 employees in 1989, the MfS was responsible for the collection and analysis of foreign intelligence and the maintenance of internal security in the GDR.

Research in the MfS archives indicates that during the mid-1980s, the Stasi became interested in acquiring a number of incapacitating agents for operational use. An MfS “discussion paper” dated September 19, 1986, prepared by Main Division XXII (responsible for counterterrorism) is titled “Application of Potential Psychoactive Substances to Influence the Psychic Behavior of Persons.” This document contains a laundry list of various classes of drugs with psychoactive effects and provides a brief assessment of their properties and drawbacks.¹ The paper suggests that as of 1986, the Stasi did not have an operational capability in the field of incapacitating agents but intended to acquire one.

The main element of the Stasi involved in chemical research and development was the Division of Weapons and Chemical Service (*Abteilung Bewaffnung und Chemischer Dienst*), or BCD. Headquartered in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen and headed by Colonel Erich Schwager, this division had 176 staff members allocated among four subdivisions, four independent offices, and several working groups. Among the assigned tasks of BCD was to equip MfS operational units with weapons, munitions, and chemical agents, and to defend against chemical and radiological attacks.²

An undated, handwritten document in the BCD files titled “The Use by Intelligence Services of Special Chemical Substances,” is apparently a set of lecture notes for training BCD staff.³ This document begins with the statement, “A large number of special chemical substances are suitable for use as sabotage-poisons and incapacitating agents by operatives . . .

¹ Die Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (BStU), MfS-HA XXII, Nr. 782/7, pp. 13-16.

² Klaus-Dietmar Henke, Siegfried Suckut, Clemens Vollnhals, Walter Süß, Roger Engelmann, *Anatomie der Staatssicherheit: Geschichte, Struktur, Methoden* (Berlin: BStU, 1995), pp. 356-358.

³ BStU, MfS-BCD, Nr. 3173, pp. 1-15.

working primarily for intelligence services, special police and army units, and terrorist organizations. . . .” The writer identifies two main applications for such substances: (1) “to bring about the death or temporary incapacitation of individuals or groups of persons” and (2) “as incapacitating agents (especially in the USA) for use in chemical torture and narcotic analysis in prisons and psychiatric facilities.” An incapacitating agent is defined (citing U.S. Army Field Manual 3-3) as a substance that causes physiological or psychological effects that persist for hours or days after exposure but do not normally result in death or permanent harm. The paper also describes planned BCD activities in this area: “Through our Division, it is anticipated in the framework of Strategy 2000 to equip service units of the MfS with special chemical substances and corresponding means of delivery. Above all, this effort concerns riot-control agents in various formulations as sprays and in special munitions for the SMART revolver and other delivery systems.” (“Strategy 2000” was reportedly a futuristic plan to modernize the MfS with advanced technologies in response to the growing internal and external security challenges facing the GDR.⁴)

A memorandum dated May 11, 1988, prepared by BCD Subdivision 4 (Technical Weapons Service), is titled “Determination of Scope of the Main Area ‘Special Chemical Substances’ and the Substances to be Investigated.”⁵ This document states that the goal of the development effort “is to make available technical operational means for the purpose of rendering harmless or incapacitating groups of persons or individuals in the open air or in closed rooms. Also to be created are capabilities for the identification (marking) of groups of persons, individuals, and objects, as well as the temporary blinding of targets ([in] personal cars). To fulfill these objectives, it is necessary to select appropriate substances synthesized by the laboratory of Division 4, test them, and propose production methods.” With respect to available riot-control agents, the priority was to investigate CN, CS, PS, DM, and the psychoactive agent BZ. Additional agents such as CR (dibenzylloxazepine) were to be obtained and studied, as well as chemical additives that could enhance agent effects, improve absorption through the skin, and increase volatility.

A memo to BCD dated July 8, 1988, from Division IX (counterintelligence) of the Main Administration for Intelligence (HVA)⁶ calls for the development of “means of self-defense” (*Selbstverteidigungsmitteln*) for incapacitating hostile individuals or groups.⁷ This memo lists various devices for delivering riot-control agents in open or enclosed spaces, including stationary and portable sprayers, tear-gas grenades, and combination-type devices (such as a flashlight with blinding effects that can also spray tear gas and/or deliver a powerful electric shock). Specific requirements are as follows: “The attacker should be quickly and effectively put out of action. Damage to health should be avoided. The means of self-defense should not have an appearance or operational characteristics similar to those of weapons. Low maintenance and ease of operation are essential. . . . The storage life of the agents should be between five and six years.” Appended to this memo are specific requests to BCD from the operational units of the HVA, including an anesthetic gun for use against dogs, a compact device that can punch a small hole in a car or train window and inject tear gas to force those inside to leave, and various camouflaged devices for knocking out or stunning persons by intramuscular injection.

A memo dated March 31, 1989, from BCD to the Operative-Technical Sector (OTS)⁸ requests the urgent procurement of laboratory equipment, including two chemical hoods, for

⁴ Thomas Gerlach und Jochen Stadt, „Editorial“, *Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat*, Nr. 19 (2006).

⁵ BStU, MfS-BCD, Nr. 2582, pp. 4-5.

⁶ HVA was the MfS component responsible for foreign intelligence collection, counterintelligence, and “active measures” in the area of operations, mainly West Germany and West Berlin.

⁷ BStU, MfS-BCD, Nr. 2582, pp. 6-10.

⁸ OTS conducted technical procurement and contract R&D in support of the various operational units of MfS.

work with “special chemical substances (highly toxic compounds).”⁹ Another memo dated June 19, 1989, from Colonel Schwager of BCD to Colonel Dr. Horst Franz, director of Main Department XXII (responsible for counterterrorism), notes that Division 6 of Franz’s department has synthesized a small amount of a novel compound called “R-8,” which Schwager describes as “an essential component for the development of effective agent mixtures.”¹⁰ Colonel Schwager writes that a small amount of R-8 was transferred to BCD in early 1989 but was “not sufficient to cover further needs.” Because BCD lacks the ability to synthesize R-8, Schwager asks Colonel Franz to supply 50 grams of the compound by early September, presumably for testing purposes. The memo continues: “In addition, we are interested in a further collaboration with respect to the production of this substance, as further requirements exist beginning in 1990 (on the order of kilograms) and imports have initially been ruled out. Procurement of the necessary precursor chemicals will be handled by the Technical Division of OTS.” The reference to imports suggests that R-8 was probably not a novel chemical but was not available in the GDR.

A subsequent memo by Colonel Franz dated July 3, 1990, reports that “the synthesis of 50 grams of ‘R-8’ will be achieved by us by 1 September 1989 and transfer to your department will follow. Because in 1990 a greater quantity of R-8 will be required, we will need additional pieces of glass apparatus. After creating the conditions for the synthesis of larger amounts, we believe that production of 1.5 kilograms of R-8 is possible. As the deadline for achieving this goal, we will aim for 31 March 1990.”¹¹

Unfortunately, the documents available in the MfS archives do not shed light on the chemical structure or properties of the substance designated “R-8.” It is possible that more detailed descriptions existed but were later destroyed. In any event, the small quantities of R-8 mentioned in the memo of June 1989 (50 grams, projected to increase to 1.5 kilograms the following year) suggest that the agent was still at an early stage of development. Of course, the opening of the Berlin Wall a few months later, on November 9, 1989, set in motion a series of events that resulted in the disappearance of the GDR less than a year later.

⁹ BStU, MfS-BCD, Nr. 2582, p. 29.

¹⁰ BStU, MfS-BCD, Nr. 2582, p. 28.

¹¹ BStU, MfS-BCD, Nr. 2582, p. 27.