

Intelligence in Public Media

Berlin Station

Produced by Olen Steinhauer (EPIX, 2015), 10 episodes

Reviewed by James Burridge

Berlin Station is a 10-episode cable television mini-series that aired on the premium cable channel “EPIX” in October 2016. The series is the first collaboration between two writers well known to the Intelligence Community audience: the espionage novelist Olen Steinhauer and the former CIA officer and frequent agency critic Robert Baer, credited as a “technical consultant.” The literary roots of the series may include Graham Greene, Charles Dickens (in terms of scope and number of characters), and, of course, John le Carré—in fact, *New York Times* critic Mike Hale called the series “le Carré light.”^a The Christopher Isherwood novel “Cabaret” or any of its stage or film adaptations is probably also in the mix.

The place is Berlin and the time is 2015. European stations and Berlin, in particular, are under siege by a Snowden-like leaker named “Thomas Shaw.” Shaw favors the Berliner Zeitung paper and appears to be an insider. The CIA deputy director secretly sends a case officer named Daniel Miller to Berlin to plug the leak. Miller is killed at the beginning of the first episode, and we flash back to his arrival.

We next meet the station personalities. The COS is a cerebral patriarch, played by Richard Jenkins, a wonderful character actor nominated for a Best Actor Oscar in 2008. The D/COS is a twitchy bundle of energy and profanity. We first encounter him when he emerges from his office to ask, “Who do I have to (expletive deleted) around here to get a password reset?” The chief of operations is ambitious, manipulative, and rarely misses an opportunity to undermine the COS and his deputy. The only ops officer we get to know is a burned-out but effective recruiter who trolls the Berlin sex scene with considerable success. He is apparently bisexual and willing to sexually

a. Mike Hale, “Disillusioned Spook, and Spilled Secrets,” *New York Times*, 15 October 2016, C4. Also published online as “Review: ‘Berlin Station,’ the Hunt for a CIA Whistle-Blower,” *New York Times* online, 14 October 2016, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/15/arts/television/review-berlin-station-the-hunt-for-a-cia-whistle-blower.html>.

engage developmentals if helpful. He is guilt-stricken over his role in administering enhanced interrogation techniques (EITs) at a black site in Morocco.

The personal and operational subplots are too complex to describe here, without considering their spoiler potential. Eventually the leaker is unmasked, but he escapes and leaves us with a monologue about the collective responsibility of everyone at CIA for the moral stain of EITs:

My name is Thomas Shaw and this is my final message. From the start I've tried to make the CIA accountable for its actions. I've not always succeeded, but I have tried. And along the way I've ruined the lives of real people. Now I need to be accountable for my own actions. The CIA's hunt for Thomas Shaw through what it called an eyewash has resulted in too many deaths and too much destruction. To what end? They still don't know who I am and they'll never know. All that's left of their deceit is broken bodies and broken lives. It would be irresponsible to continue on my path. We're all complicit. We all know that something is wrong, and we've known it for a long time, but we do nothing. Exposing wrongs is not the same as righting them.

Now the bottom line question that motivates most of us to watch these shows: what did they get right about our business? Not much, in this reviewer’s opinion. First of all, there is no bureaucratic context. This is a common feature in fictional portrayals of CIA. The COS talks to the director and the deputy director, but there is no intermediate level—no Mission Centers, no Headquarters divisions. There is also no ambassador or embassy; it’s as if CIA rented an entire building and hung out a sign saying “US Embassy.” Although the leaks and failed operations disturb the broader US-German bilateral relationship, there is no interaction with anyone from the embassy. No one does any cover work. Operations with enormous flap potential are undertaken very casually. In one episode,

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Miller is simultaneously directing two unrelated operations from a rooftop: a cyber attack on the Berliner Zeitung and a lethal CT operation against a suicide bomber in a local market. The cyber operation succeeds, but the suicide bomber blows up the market after a sniper kills an innocent woman.

Everyone except Miller is ethically challenged, some to the point of criminality. In previous posts, the COS and the D/COS both invented assets and pocketed the money, the COS to cover his 2008 investment losses and D/COS to pay for an expensive divorce. The COPS fell in love (and lives with) a German bar owner who provided access to an Algerian suspected of terrorist financing. She closed the case prematurely so as not to complicate her relationship with her lover, concluding that the Algerian was clean. He wasn't, and later helped fund the Charley Hebdo attack. The administrative assistant is sleeping with the COS and destroys evidence of the bogus assets. The COS sabotaged the recruitment of an Iranian cabinet minister solely to discredit a rival.

Station's treatment of both assets and officers is both callous and counterproductive. The body count of those sacrificed for bureaucratic convenience or personal advancement expands with every episode. After the first Berlin leak, the station leadership scapegoats an officer to placate the BND, although he had nothing to do with the program revealed.

The station leadership keeps a Saudi asset in place despite warnings from his case officer that his increasingly flagrant homosexuality had placed him in danger of being recalled to Riyadh. Another subplot involves a Chinese general who defected by means of a CIA-BND operation and is awaiting resettlement. When the computer penetration of the Berliner Zeitung reveals that the next Shaw story will describe the BND role in the general's defection, the COS and his BND interlocutor develop a brilliant but heartless way to discredit Shaw. They "unde-

fect" the general, returning him to the Chinese authorities. The Chinese agree to propagate the story that the general was under surveillance in Beijing the entire time, making Shaw's account of the BND role in the defection look completely false. Finally, the COS ignores warnings about the danger to a non-official cover officer (NOC) in a fake ISIS bride operation, because he has been led to believe that success will ensure a promotion. The NOC is killed.

A stock situation in nearly every fictional depiction of CIA is a verbal confrontation between an asset and a case officer, and *Berlin Station* is no exception. Perhaps script writers and directors should get a pass from insider critics on this issue. Good tradecraft minimizes face to face meetings. But the asset-case officer relationship is so inherently dramatic that slavish adherence to tradecraft would deprive the writers of some of their best moments. So this reviewer will no longer bash writers for their depictions of such meetings.

To recap, we have a station where the conduct of the leadership is highly unethical and even criminal. It is completely autonomous and answers to no higher management levels at Headquarters nor to an ambassador. The leadership views its assets and even its own officers as disposable. This is not a station most of us have ever encountered.

Shaw's rationale for his leaks is that we're all complicit. The notion that the entire CIA workforce is complicit in the use of EITs is the underlying artistic and ideological premise of the series. Even the Christ-like Miller, who sacrifices his own life for his colleagues, is guilty. At one point he says, "I accept the fact that I choose to work for an imperfect institution."

In summary, this is an ambitious portrayal of the spy business, beautifully filmed and enhanced by a terrific cast. Its central premise of collective guilt is both implausible and objectionable—but it is, after all, entertainment. Perhaps Season Two will bring redemption.

