

The New York Times

Lawrence Martin-Bittman, 87, Master of Disinformation, Dies

By **Richard Sandomir**

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Lawrence Martin-Bittman, who as a Cold War spy for Czechoslovakia specialized in running disinformation schemes to roil the West, and who, after defecting in 1968 to the United States, taught the perils of propaganda to journalism students, died on Tuesday at his home in Rockport, Mass. He was 87.

His partner, Liz Spaulding, confirmed the death.

“I openly admit that I did a lot of damage to the West, particularly to the United States, as a specialist in dirty tricks,” Mr. Martin-Bittman told the NBC News series “Dateline” in 2009.

Mr. Martin-Bittman — whose original name was Ladislav Bittman — joined the Czech intelligence service out of university in 1954 as tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were rising.

The Czech service, which collaborated with others in the Soviet-dominated Eastern bloc, was deeply involved in forgeries, like taking the signatures of United States diplomats from Christmas cards and using them on faked documents detailing supposed American conspiracies worldwide, and political sabotage, like setting up a brothel with the Soviets to trap West German politicians in compromising positions.

As a spy, Mr. Martin-Bittman operated from Berlin and Vienna, elite espionage postings during the Cold War on both sides. In 1964 he became the deputy commander of the Czech service’s Department for Active Measures and Disinformation.

That year, he helped execute a wild plan to discredit West Germany.

By his account, a Czech television documentary crew was exploring Black Lake, southwest of Prague, in hopes of raising mysterious objects — possibly Nazi treasures — that they had spotted in earlier dives. Knowing of the crew’s plan, the Czech service dumped four German military chests filled with blank papers at the bottom of the lake.

Mr. Martin-Bittman, an experienced diver who posed as a Czech government official, led the crew into the water to retrieve the chests. They were then taken away by intelligence officials claiming that they had to be X-rayed for explosives.

While the cache was supposedly being examined, intelligence officers replaced the papers with what were billed as Third Reich documents that, when revealed publicly, indicated that former Nazis were spying for West Germany. (Another Czech spy, Josef Frolik, wrote in 1975 that forged documents were dumped in the chests.)

“It was the start of a two-year campaign to revive the threat of Nazism and to point a finger at West Germany and say, ‘They are still there and West Germany is still in great potential danger,’ ” Mr. Martin-Bittman said in an interview for “Soviet Active Measures” (1984), a film produced by the United States Information Agency.

In 1967, he was posted to Vienna at the Czech Embassy. There he was ostensibly a press attaché, but he was actually directing agents — Western European journalists among them — who had been recruited by the Communists to gather intelligence and to disseminate disinformation to undermine relations between Western European countries and the United States.

He remained a dirty trickster until the summer of 1968, when, angered at the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and Slovakia), he defected to West Germany and was granted asylum in the United States, where he changed his name to Lawrence Michael Martin. (He later added Bittman to his surname.)

The invasion — which crushed the liberalizing reforms that had been instituted by Alexander Dubcek, the Czechoslovak leader — “was the ultimate shock of my life, and this was the moment of truth when it was impossible to fool myself and justify anything I did in the past,” Mr. Martin-Bittman said in a video interview in 2016 for “Silver Mines,” a program that appeared on YouTube about the lives of elderly people.

His defection, which led a military court in Czechoslovakia to sentence him to death, was considered a coup for the United States.



Lawrence Martin-Bittman, formerly Ladislav Bittman, testifying in 1985 before a United States Senate panel on espionage. Terry Ashe/The LIFE Images Collection, via Getty Images

“Bittman was really one of the great experts of the Communist bloc, the Soviet bloc, on disinformation,” F. Mark Wyatt, a retired senior C.I.A. official who was an expert in covert action, told The New York Times in 1994. “He is an outstanding defector success story.”

Ladislav Bittman was born on Feb. 14, 1931, in Prague. His father, also named Ladislav, was a welder, and his mother, Andela (Pucenkelová) Bittmanova, was a homemaker who rented out two rooms in their apartment to make ends meet.

He was 8 when Germany invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939. “I’ll never forget the mass of German soldiers marching through the streets,” he said in the “Silver Mines” video. “It was a result of the betrayal of Czechoslovakia by the Western powers.”

At 15 he joined the Communist Party, as his parents had. He later graduated from Charles University in Prague with degrees in journalism and international law.

When his 14 years of spying, forgeries and fake news ended with his defection, Mr. Martin-Bittman began to write books about espionage and disinformation, among them “The Deception Game” (1972) and “The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider’s View” (1985).

In a review for the journal *Slavic Review*, Josef Korbel, the Czech-American diplomat and the father of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, praised Mr. Martin-Bittman for the understated way in which he recalled his adventures in disinformation.

“His matter-of-fact, unsensational style in describing them lends credibility to the stories,” Mr. Korbel wrote.

In 1972, Mr. Martin-Bittman’s career took another turn: He started teaching journalism, as well as courses in propaganda, at Boston University. In 1986 he opened the university’s Program for the Study of Disinformation.

He was pleased that the university took a chance on him.

“Imagine,” he told The Times. “You search for a job and you are asked, ‘What are your credentials?’ and you say, ‘Twenty-two years in the Communist Party and 14 years in intelligence as a Communist spy.’ Not exactly the right experience for this environment, but they were not scared of it.”

Mark J. Thompson, who won a Pulitzer Prize as a reporter for The Fort Worth Star-Telegram in 1985, wrote in an email that he took Mr. Martin-Bittman’s disinformation class in 1975.

“Beyond the history of his dark art,” he wrote, “I guess there were only two lessons to be learned in his class: how to deceive and how to avoid being deceived. Like most good professors, he encouraged us to be skeptics.”

Mr. Martin-Bittman retired in the late 1990s to spend his time painting watercolors.

In addition to Ms. Spaulding, he survived by his son, Michael Talmor; his daughter, Dr. Katerina Bittmanova; seven grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren. He was divorced twice and widowed once.

In 1994, Mr. Martin-Bittman gave a party after a court in the Czech Republic lifted his death sentence.

In invitations to friends and colleagues, he asked them to help him celebrate “my re-entering the society of decent human beings on Feb. 24, 1994, from 4 to 6 p.m., in the disinformation documentation center.”

He added, “This is not disinformation.”

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