

SRF Rundschau: Cryptoleaks - How CIA and BND Spied on the World With Swiss Help

Cryptoleaks - Wie CIA und BND mit Schweizer Hilfe weltweit spionierten

For more than half a century, governments all over the world trusted the Swiss company Crypto AG to keep the communication of their diplomats, soldiers and officials a secret. Our investigation uncovers what experts call 'the intelligence coup of the century': Crypto AG was owned by the CIA and the German secret service BND. The company sold manipulated devices to over a 100 countries, allowing the CIA and BND to read along - a priceless advantage for both involved countries.

Our film is based on a leaked document originating from the archives of the CIA, as well as hundreds of pages of documents from the BND, and confirmed in over 300 hours of background interviews and conversations. The documents tell the story of 'Minerva', the code name given to the intelligence operation. Founded in the 1950s by the Swede Boris Hagelin, Crypto AG became the world market leader for encryption devices. Its biggest selling point was the Swiss neutrality. Non-western countries, from Asia to Africa to the Middle East trusted Crypto AG and invested millions of dollars into devices they believed to be secure. This all worked out well for the secret services, until Crypto AG salesman Hans Bühler was arrested by Iranian police in 1992. Iran claimed Bühler was a spy, held him for 9 months and subjected him to torture. Once his release was secured and Bühler was back home, he insisted on bringing the secret of Crypto AG to light. The affair almost uncovered the entire Minerva operation, but the secret services got a lucky break. Miraculously, Swiss police investigations came to nothing, evidence disappeared and politicians refused to become involved.

The famous Swiss neutrality, sold - to ensure Switzerland could maintain a stance of 'plausible deniability'.

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