

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

New Berlin crisis on the agenda?

A U.S. military train is held up for 24 hours without explanation and the head of the KGB came to town.

On Wednesday, May 23, Soviet KGB head Victor M. Chebrikov arrived unannounced in East Berlin, sparking intense speculation about the aim of his mission. The most likely evaluation is that his visit had to do with the ongoing Soviet escalation of psychological warfare maneuvers against the Western powers in West Berlin and on the transit routes from West Germany to the city.

For several weeks in a row, Soviet and East German air force maneuvers have intimidated Western airliners in the air corridor over Berlin, and in most cases, the Soviet liaison officers at the Berlin Air Traffic Control Center have informed the Western powers only on a moment's notice that there would be maneuvers.

The density of this interference in free air flight in the Berlin corridor has risen from 4-5 maneuvers per month in 1983 to 20-25 now, and the Soviets have not concealed from their British, French, and American colleagues at the control center the fact that they do not care much about the agreements which regulate civil and military air flight in the air corridor over Berlin.

Articles appearing in East German military publications have pointed to the 1955-57 protocols signed between the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Soviet Union on "East German air sovereignty, including the corridor over Berlin," and an article appearing a couple of weeks ago in the prominent magazine *Militärwesen*

even called into question the rights of the West to maintain any air flight whatsoever in the corridor.

My sources in Bonn and Berlin point out that all of these Soviet and East German interferences are occurring in the context of the 35th anniversary of the end of the Berlin Blockade on May 11, 1949. Some place the interference in the context of the general hardening of Soviet positions toward the West, and a few even point to the likelihood of a new Berlin crisis.

I am tending to this latter evaluation, because it makes sense in the context of escalating attacks in the Soviet media against the alleged "rebirth of German militarism and revanchism," and because the Soviets know that West Berlin has a high emotional value for West Germans. Any threat to the safety and normal functioning of this city can be relied upon to provoke an emotional and political crisis in Bonn, and the situation in the former capital of the German state is always considered a litmus test of the success or failure of Bonn's policy toward the GDR and the Soviet Union.

The present Soviet strategy of tension is certainly aimed at driving a wedge between the West Germans and the three Western allied powers in Berlin. All of the reported air incidents over Berlin and in the corridor have affected airliners of the three Western powers.

There has also been interference in the rights of the Western powers to

go on regular patrols in East Germany, and in one case, a French officer was killed and two others wounded by East German soldiers while on such a patrol mission.

Western protests have been weak, and the French government even tried to keep the incident a secret.

This appeasement policy has only encouraged the Soviets to gear up their provocations, which are also intended to encourage latent West German sentiments against the military presence of French, British, and American forces in Berlin.

Sources in West Berlin tell me that the Soviets have given hints to West Berlin politicians visiting the East that their city would be "better off without the Western powers present."

This war of nerves has obviously borne fruit: When newly elected West Berlin Mayor Diepgen visited Washington, D.C. in April, he brought up the issue of revising the status of the Western powers in the city.

The recent high-point of the Soviet confrontation strategy occurred on May 8, the anniversary day of the final capitulation of the Nazi Reich in 1945.

At Marienborn, close to the German-German border, Soviet and East German soldiers halted an American military train which was on its way to West Berlin, kept it hostage for 24 hours, and then released it, all without explanation. Stopping Western transport vehicles on the transit routes has always been a pattern in the past Berlin crises. The incident of May 8 might thus be considered a prelude to a new crisis.

The Soviets seem to be confident that there will be no Western retaliation or protest. It looks, indeed, as if the Soviets have some friends in the U.S. State Department, which kept the May 8 incident secret for more than two weeks.