

## Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

### Geopolitical games with plutonium

*Phony plutonium scandals are causing tension and sabotaging cooperation between Russia and Germany.*

**‘W**e are observing the fact that German authorities are increasingly dancing to the tune of those people that intend to escalate rumors about Russian nuclear materials,” declared Kyril Sidorov, of Russia’s counterespionage agency FSK in charge of protecting military industries, in an interview in the Aug. 1 German weekly *Der Spiegel*.

“The public is led to believe,” Sidorov said, “that Russia is no longer able to control the production, storage, and transport of nuclear arms, which would imply a violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. On the one hand, they’re pushing for supranational control of the Russian nuclear complex, and on the other hand, the demand [for nuclear substances] is being created in the criminal environment.”

Ironically, Sidorov’s remarks, coming a few days after yet another seizure of plutonium in Germany, proved prophetic. On Aug. 12, police at the Munich airport seized illegally transported plutonium from three passengers on a Lufthansa flight arriving from Moscow.

The incident, which involved three non-Russians, led to a new media shrillness about the need to put Russian nuclear facilities under tight control, and triggered new speculation about left or right terrorists, or Islamic states, trying to build a nuclear bomb. The incident compelled Chancellor Helmut Kohl to call the affair “a threat not only for us but also for the rest of the world,” and to order Bernd Schmidbauer, his chief secret intelligence coordinator, on a special mission to Moscow. This has caused

diplomatic tensions, because expert cooperation in the field of nuclear safety has already been established, and it came just as joint civilian projects in nuclear technology are being negotiated between Bonn and Moscow.

Two such cooperation agreements were to be signed in Munich by the deputy Russian minister of nuclear power, Valentin Sidorenko, who happened to be on the same flight that brought the three plutonium smugglers to Munich airport—a strange coincidence, indeed.

The question arises as to whose benefit all these scandals work, especially when certain politicians claim that the seized plutonium comes from military breeder reactors. This implies that there is western espionage into Russian military Russian nuclear facilities.

There is another, related question, namely, who benefits from Germany’s being defamed as an international hub for illegal nuclear transfers from the East? This question has been posed in public by Russians, not Germans.

In Germany, there was a “nuclear” affair preceding the recent illegal plutonium seizures: The U.S. Department of State protested a few weeks earlier against plans for a new “neutron source” research reactor in Garching, near Munich, that is to replace a 37-year-old research facility. The note to the German Foreign Ministry voiced U.S. concern about the project allegedly “violating vital Non-Proliferation Treaty clauses.”

While there are groups in the U.S.

government who still follow the old British-inspired policy of keeping the reunited and nominally sovereign German state and its high-tech sector under political control, other tendencies have come to the fore. On Aug. 17, the Clinton administration changed course, downplaying the scare stories, and asserting that the United States has no evidence that the smuggled nuclear materials even came from Russia, and no evidence of a black market for such materials. U.S. officials in the State and Energy departments took pains to declare that the Russians are very serious about controlling nuclear materials, and that the United States is cooperating closely with Russia and with Germany on these matters.

These coordinated Aug. 17 policy statements were conspicuously at odds with the calls for international policing and the scare stories against Russia and Germany coming from the British press.

There are also influential people in Moscow who oppose better German-Russian relations. Recently, reminiscences about the “Great Patriotic War” against the Nazis, and previews of the way next year’s 50th anniversary of the German capitulation in 1945 will be celebrated by “victorious Russia,” signal that somebody wants to create tension with Germany. It comes as no surprise that these are the Moscow circles who work with British-centered interests in the field of “free market” policies.

Such circles may be involved in shipping the illegal plutonium. Their underground activity is also sabotaging talks on cooperation in new nuclear technologies, such as the high-temperature reactor that has been developed by Germany, and which should, because of its raw materials processing potentials, be attractive for Russian industry.