
Documentation

Moscow signature on Berlin May Day riots

by Rainer Apel

Again, the Kremlin has decided to launch a crisis over Berlin, the most sensitive confrontation-pivot in Europe. On May Day, the western part of the city experienced the heaviest outburst of street-level violence launched by the left-wing underground in recent years.

The riots developed around an "alternate May Day festival," which was arranged by the pro-terrorist (Green) Alternative List and other "initiatives" in Kreuzberg, a section of the city directly bordering on the Berlin Wall. The SEW (Socialist Unity Party of West Berlin), the western section of the East German ruling party SED in the city, plays a central role in this scene—squatters groups, anti-American initiatives and the like. The Alternative List, seated in the municipal parliament, cooperates closely with the non-parliamentary SEW, which receives sizable sums of money from the East for its "work." The money is given by the SED, in close consultations with the Red Army military command at Karlshorst.

The trouble on May Day began during the street-festival, at about 4 p.m., when youth gangs began attacking the police, and destroyed a police car. To disband the riots, police used tear-gas, and pulled together an anti-riot force of 400 policemen. The situation calmed down for the moment, but behind the scene, the left-wing underground massed and equipped its forces for the larger confrontation, beginning two hours later, when a mob of 900, largely masked individuals, went into action.

The mob acted in a concentrated and apparently well-coordinated way. For example, there were special and targeted attacks on the police and the fire brigades, which tried to fight the many fires the mob was starting in more than 50 shops, after plundering them. "This is the worst thing I've ever seen in my life," commented the commander of the fire brigades.

The battle left 70 police cars and several fire-fighting vehicles damaged. During the attacks, steel pellets were fired from sling-shots, and molotov cocktails thrown. More than 40 policemen were injured, some of them seriously, more than 58 small stores plundered and burned down, and numerous private cars were destroyed as well.

The riotous mob was given directions, from 7 p.m. on, via the "Radio 100" station, a private station run by the Alternative List, several homosexual rights groups, the pro-terrorist rag, *tageszeitung*, and a group of left-wing Social Democrats. The station is authorized by the Senate of West Berlin, strangely enough also "in compliance with the [Western] allied powers." A certain co-funding by the SEW, which has an emphasis on "opposition groups" in its political work, can be assumed.

During the whole period of four hours authorized program-time, Radio 100 "reported" on the riot scene, the main confrontation points with the police, and the "results."

The pictures run on television and in the newspapers of the post-riot scene recall the civil war scene in Belfast or Beirut—houses with smoke-stained walls, windows smashed, cars lying upside down, burned out, the streets filled with glass shambles, burned tires, and other trash. The association of shop-owners estimated the material damage caused on its Kreuzberg members alone at between 10 and 15 million deutschemarks.

Soviet attack on Kohl

The same May Day, Soviet and East German media attacked an official event in West Berlin of the evening before, where Bonn Chancellor Helmut Kohl addressed the 750th anniversary of Berlin's city rights. Kohl, who emphasized the political, economic, and cultural ties between Bonn and West Berlin, as they are affirmed by the 1971 Four-Power Agreement, was attacked by the Eastern media for "cold-war confrontationist rhetoric." They charged Kohl with "hysterically maintaining official connections between the city and West Germany, which do not exist."

The media attacks and the riots in Kreuzberg were part of the same confrontation build-up, apparently. Yet, officials of the German administration and of the three Western allied powers played the crisis down. An aide to the Aspen Institute in the city commented to journalists, however, on May 5: "Some people from the East wanted to make a show, timed to coincide with the 750th anniversary meetings in West Berlin, when a lot of dignitaries from around the world would be there."

Police officials, taking the affair more seriously, have pointed to another aspect that should cause concern: President Reagan will visit West Berlin on June 12, to address a rally of 20,000 citizens next to the Berlin Wall. There is evidence that, from the violence-prone underground scene in the Rhine-Main region and in the area around Göttingen, several hundred rioters are being deployed into Berlin especially for planned confrontations around June 12.

In June 1982, Reagan's arrival in Berlin was accompanied by an outburst of violent street riots in the inner city. Quite obviously, the new crisis in Berlin is a Soviet show of force against the United States directly, and poses a live security threat to the U.S. President.