

FRIDAY, AUGUST 26, 1994

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Nuclear Black Market: Much Ado About Not Much

By Josef Joffe

MUNICH — Psst, wanna build a bomb? Come to Germany, it's hog heaven for plutonium, lithium and other goodies that go into the making of nuclear or even thermonuclear weapons.

Fortunately, that is poppycock, even though German authorities have counted 440 illicit nuclear deals since 1991.

That is a startling number, but on closer inspection the incidents do not add up to Apocalypse Now.

It is grams and micrograms, a few drops of caesium here and a handful of lithium there. And the big haul that Munich police proudly presented this month — “the biggest-ever plutonium find in Germany, and probably in the world” — was not the real stuff.

It was 300 grams of mixed-oxide fuel, a blend of natural (non-bomb) uranium and plutonium that powers civilian reactors. A terrorist, even a state like Libya, would have a very hard time separating the bomb-grade plutonium from the rest of the fuel.

Earlier in the summer, the world was similarly shocked with tall tales of plutonium and uranium busts in Germany. On closer inspection, the catch turns out to be six grams of the one and less than one gram of the other. If you want to build a bomb this way, you would have to be very patient. Since your average terrorist

is not exactly a bomb *Meister*, he would have to acquire at least nine kilograms of pure plutonium metal. Even then, his problem would only begin.

The basic recipe he can get from a public library. After that, it is precision work of the highest caliber that only an advanced economy can master — machining a perfect plutonium sphere, surrounding it with a decent neutron-reflector, enveloping it with high explosives all of which must go off in the same millisecond to compress the core into a critical mass. Carlos could not do it, and neither could Libya.

So why the excitement that galvanizes European and American newsmagazines to lead with cover stories such as “Nukes for Sale” or “The Blackmailer’s New Weapons”? Is Russia really flooding the market with bomb-grade material? And is Germany really the place where the likes of Iraq or Hezbollah are heading with their nuclear shopping lists?

Hardly. “The European market,” a German expert told *Newsweek*, “consists almost exclusively of undercover policemen.” The chief prosecutor of the city-state of Bremen confirms: “There is no evidence of a genuine market for plutonium in Germany.” In other words, it is

Amateur Hour rather than Armageddon — a story of countless sting operations netting desperate small-timers in search of instant riches.

An investigating commission of the German Parliament might well ponder why this is so — why the police and the secret services are creating a climate of doom in the name of law enforcement. Cynics have a quick answer. The government is pushing hard for legislation that would give the intelligence services extensive new powers of domestic surveillance currently not sanctioned by the constitution. What better way to convince the skeptics than to foster visions of imminent nuclear disaster?

But if there is a danger, it is neither clear nor present. Although it may well be true that corruption in Russia is rising while the state's grip is loosening, there is no evidence that bomb-grade material is slipping out of the country in significant quantities.

Nor would this be very plausible. As a nuclear power, Russia has absolutely no interest in sharing its exalted place with the nuclear wannabes of this world. Yes, there is leakage from Russian laboratories and power plants, and some of the stuff ends up in Europe. But the last thing Boris Yeltsin will countenance is

the looting of well-guarded Russian plutonium stores for private gain and profit.

Nor is there a real demand that would get the well-organized Russian underground into the game. Terrorists can wreak havoc much more cheaply with that blend of fertilizer and diesel fuel which almost wrecked the World Trade Center in New York. And rogue states are not interested in a few kilos of plutonium.

They don't want one or two bombs, which would invite deadly preemption, but a whole fuel cycle, which would yield nuclear independence and an arsenal large enough for dispersion and concealment.

Nonetheless, Russia and the West should take notice. Sometimes, drops do presage a flood, and hence it is high time to put in place all those dams that we have discussed for years — from a functioning accounting system (there is none in Russia) to physical safeguards installed at storage sites, border posts and airports. For nuclear disarmament is now releasing about 100 tons of pure plutonium a year. In the hands of experienced bomb makers, that is good for up to 20,000 bombs.

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