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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

11 October 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Soviet Intentions in Berlin Incident

1. Soviet motives in the current incident along the autobahn are highly puzzling. It makes little sense in the context of recent Soviet policy moves aimed at a relaxation of tensions; it makes almost no sense in view of Soviet interests in arranging for large purchases of grain. Putting pressure on such an extremely sensitive Western position as access to Berlin jeopardizes much that Khrushchev has sought to accomplish by signing the test ban. We would not exclude, therefore, that the real origin of the incident was a series of local blunders or misunderstandings. Detention of Convoy No. 27 at Babelsberg, however, suggests that the Soviets are now acting deliberately and in full awareness of American unwillingness to comply with Soviet demands for dismounting.

2. Perhaps the simplest answer is that the Soviets are seeking a Berlin incident which focuses on the question of access

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and indirectly on the question of Western forces. The Soviet leaders might have concluded, in light of the conversation between Secretary Rusk and Gromyko, that the US has no serious interest in discussing the Berlin problem. A sharp reminder of Allied vulnerability by stepping on the Berlin "corns" would be intended to generate pressure for an American promise to take up the access and troop questions. Under this interpretation, the Soviets would close out the current incident on the understanding that the broad problems would be negotiated, perhaps with Gromyko in Washington. They might even close it out without any formal understanding, hoping that the US had gotten the point that serious talks must begin.

3. This is a risky gambit, and the Soviets certainly must recognize the potential dangers and the threat to other objectives. Moreover, it is not a particularly promising move, since the Soviets can scarcely believe that the US is prepared at this juncture to make any serious concessions on Berlin. It is possible, therefore, that Soviet motives are more obscure and complicated, even unrelated to the Berlin access question. For example, it could be that the Soviet military has staged the incident as a means of pressure on the political leaders, because of discontent with

- 2 -

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the present direction of Soviet policies. Or it could be that the Soviets have felt the need to demonstrate a tough position because of intra-Bloc politics, particularly in view of the Chinese charges that recent Soviet policy represents a betrayal of the East German regime.

4. We believe that, whatever their precise aims, the Soviets will probably close out the incident before the danger of escalation increases much more. They are likely to indicate their readiness to talk about the question of access procedures and release the convoy. We think the chances are good that the Soviets will not allow the situation to develop to the point where an American military probe is launched on to the autobahn.

5. Nevertheless, because Soviet intentions are so puzzling, and the timing so apparently unsuitable we would not exclude a willingness to let the crisis develop momentum and drag on for some time. The Soviets could plan to make a number of onerous demands for immediate compliance before freeing the convoy. If the Soviets have miscalculated their way into a serious incident, other factors -- internal politics and Bloc relations -- could intervene to make Soviet moves more unpredictable and more risky. If the incident is not closed out within a day or so, we would conclude that the Soviets are seeking to humiliate the US and make some important gains in Berlin.

6. Since there is no clear explanation for the Soviet move, we feel obliged to consider yet another possibility relating to Cuba. The USSR is under considerable pressure to relieve Castro of the harassments presently being directed against him, yet it finds itself powerless to take any direct local action to this end. It may be that the autobahn incident is designed to remind the US of its vulnerability in Berlin as a means of dissuading it from pursuing an active anti-Castro course. If this is the USSR's intention, we would expect some Soviet hints designed to get this across to Washington, but we are not aware that any Soviet official has suggested this connection.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

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