

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Strauss death leaves political vacuum

Franz Josef Strauss died suddenly under mysterious circumstances. Do Moscow's special forces hold the key?

The social forces of political protest have ceased to be the sole or even the principal target of Soviet advances. Now the Kremlin seeks to make more of an impact on responsible circles, including those of conservative opinion. . . . In the Kremlin's view, West Germany is not only the most crucial, but also the most vulnerable country in Western Europe."

These are excerpts from a new report on Soviet propaganda that German researcher Gerhard Wettig has published through the Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies in London. Other experts have warned recently, too, that Moscow may exploit what it views as the "leaderless period in the West" from the U.S. presidential elections through the inauguration of the new President in January 1989. West Germany's political elites are on the very top of the Soviet target list for destabilization.

This is what makes the sudden death of Bavaria's Prime Minister Franz Josef Strauss so shocking. Moscow expects to meet no problems in Germany's political elites, except the small but influential conservative current that has historically been mainly organized in the autonomous Bavarian state section of the Christian Democrats, the Christian Social Union (CSU).

The Oct. 3 death of longtime CSU party chairman Strauss, the leading spokesman of the aerospace and military-industrial complex, poses the threat of disorientation, maybe even dismantling of the CSU party organization. This is what the Kremlin has been waiting and working for, over

decades, for once the CSU ceases to be a mouthpiece of more conservative, generally anti-Soviet but not always pro-American views, a significant bastion of political resistance to Moscow's annexation plans for Germany will be gone.

There are, indeed, hints that the death of Strauss was not at all "natural." Although 73 years old, Strauss was in stable health, fully capable of flying his own Cessna Citation aircraft over long distances. He was an experienced pilot, and maybe because of that, he was able to escape a critical situation on Sept. 26, when his aircraft, on the way home from a visit to Bulgaria, had a malfunction of the cabin pressure and had to dive from an altitude of 10,000 meters. Strauss barely escaped a crash by stabilizing the aircraft at 3,000 meters.

This incident is not viewed as a "normal accident" by many in Germany who knew Strauss. It has been said that the problem on the way home from Bulgaria was due to sabotage, some kind of manipulation of the Cessna technical equipment by Eastern (not necessarily Bulgarian) specialists.

Strauss's life ended less than a week later, on Oct. 1, when he climbed from a helicopter that had brought him from Munich to a place near the town of Regensburg, and collapsed. Apart from an unusual heartbeat malfunction, also his lungs and kidneys collapsed, and his condition worsened in the hospital, until his death two days later.

This affair resembles the case of Uwe Barschel, the prime minister of

the state of Schleswig-Holstein, who luckily survived an air crash on May 31, 1987, which killed all the rest of the crew. While still in the hospital, Barschel then found himself a target of a vicious libel campaign, launched by pro-Soviet politicians and media. On Oct. 11, 1987, Barschel was found dead in a Geneva hotel room—officially, it was a "suicide." His death paved the way for the Social Democrats to take power in Schleswig-Holstein.

Barschel had inside knowledge of "Irangate"-type arms deals involving the Soviets, and that is, intelligence sources say, the main reason he was killed.

Two other prominent German Christian Democrats have died unnatural deaths in recent years. Within a few weeks of each other, in the summer of 1985, first Alois Mertes died of a "stroke," then Werner Marx, the chairman of the parliamentary commission on foreign relations in Bonn, died of "complications" resulting from routine heart surgery. Both being influential critics of Moscow's policy and of Western détente illusions, their deaths opened the CDU to the rise of Moscow's pets in the party.

What will happen to the CSU, without Strauss? Will it be wrecked by internal "succession fights," or ally with the liberals of the Christian Democrats in Germany? Or, will sections of it join the Patriots for Germany, the small party that is allied with the LaRouche movement in U.S. politics?

The latter option is, apparently, viewed as a "high risk" in Moscow. And with two important elections ahead—for national parliament in Bonn and in the Bavarian capital of Munich—the Soviets have reason to worry about a potential breakthrough for the Patriots.