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TV Reception a Mess? Blame the Russians

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 7 — Ever since the Soviet Union began using its new embassy compound on Mount Alto, just about the highest point in Washington, there has been no end of complaint from American intelligence agencies. But to some residents of Glover Park, the neighborhood just across the street, the latest development makes the longstanding national security concerns seem trivial.

Even as the Russians' uninspiring brick and marble buildings started going up about 10 years ago, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and others protested that the United States had given the K.G.B. the best spot in the city for electronic spying.

In the last several months, members of Congress have complained that the Russians were using microwave receivers to intercept hundreds of private telephone calls. And intelligence officials say the K.G.B., the Soviet intelligence agency, is directing laser-beam listening devices at Government-office windows, eavesdropping on conversations by picking up vibrations of the glass. In some offices, the Government has implanted tiny loudspeakers in the panes and played music through them so that instead of sensitive conversations the K.G.B. hears Montovani.

All of that might seem pretty serious stuff. But consider this:

The District of Columbia is one of the last major cities without cable television. So hundreds of residents subscribe to services that beam Home Box Office, Cable News Network and other cable channels to microwave receivers planted on their rooftops. Reception is variable, depending on buildings or other obstacles that block the microwave signal en route. But in Glover Park, reception had been nearly perfect — until last month.

When one resident noticed that his signal had gone sour, he called for

service, and days later the Marquee Television Network, which handles H.B.O. service, sent a repairer.

He looked at the television set, noted the fuzz and roll and funny wavy lines, and said: "Your signal is being scrambled. I've never seen anything like that before."

Then he climbed on the roof with some electronic equipment, looked in the direction of his transmitter, in suburban Rockville, Md., and shouted down to the ground: "I see where the problem's coming from. It's that white building just over there," pointing to the Soviet compound, and said there was no solution but to end the service. The subscriber was enraged.

Craig Howard, director of operations for Marquee Television, said: "People all over that area around the embassy are getting interference. We've never had anything take our signal and scramble it, blank it out like that before. Over there, the embassy is the first place you have to point to." And an intelligence source said, "They're working so many different eavesdropping devices over there, it's no wonder."

But Boris Malakhov, a Soviet Embassy press officer, said: "I don't think there's any grounds for such statements. The problem isn't coming from here."

But suppose Mr. Malakhov is wrong; suppose the K.G.B. does not tell the press office everything it does and its devices are scrambling H.B.O. movies. What could be the reason?

'The problem isn't coming from here.'

Boris Malakhov, a Soviet Embassy press officer

In Moscow last week, a group of Soviet officials denounced several American movies, citing "Rambo: First Blood Part II" and "Rocky IV," calling them "war-nography" and part of an "anti-Soviet campaign." Could H.B.O. be carrying movies the Russians despise?

A glance at the service's recent schedules shows it has been running "Mom the Wolfman & Me," "Where the Boys Are" and "The Trolls and the Christmas Express," among others. But no Rambo or Rocky films.

Besides, Mr. Malakhov said, the Soviet Embassy compound gets H.B.O., too, and "we're not getting good reception either."

"We have video recorders here," he said, "and we like to collect and trade American movies. But we can't do it anymore."

"When you find out what the problem is, we'd like to know."