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pg. A1

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 14 — West German authorities seized a highly sophisticated American-built computer just seven minutes before it was to leave for the Soviet Union via Sweden, the Treasury Department reported today.

John M. Walker Jr., Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Enforcement and Operations, said the seizure was made on Friday "in the nick of time."

He said Customs officials stationed in West Germany had told the Germans about the planned shipment after receiving word that the complex mini-

computer made in the United States by the Digital Equipment Corporation would be smuggled into the Soviet Union.

The Commerce Department has banned its shipment to nations of the Eastern bloc to keep them from acquiring high technology equipment that could be used for military purposes. The Soviet Union lacks the technology to manufacture this type of computer, Customs officials maintain.

Joseph Nahil, a spokesman for the manufacturer, said the computer system, a VAX 11/782 that sells for \$1.5 million to \$2 million, is frequently sold

in this country and used primarily for structural analysis in the construction industry and electromechanical design.

It can also be used "for missile guidance or something like that" and for "keeping track of troops and weapons," said William Green, deputy assistant commissioner of the Customs Service. It is sold to the United States military.

The computer had been shipped by a firm in New York State to an affiliated company in South Africa and from

Continued on Page D19, Column 3

Soviet-Bound Computer Seized at U.S. Request

Continued From Page A1

there to Hamburg, West Germany, where it was seized, Mr. Walker said. He would not identify the American concern. Mr. Nahil said Digital Equipment was unaware of the destination of the computer seized today.

Mr. Walker said the computer had been loaded aboard a freighter that was about to leave the pier in Hamburg and sail to Sweden when authorization came from a German court to remove the computer from the ship.

West German customs agents had been waiting on the pier for hours for the authorization. At first, the German courts had denied the United States Government's request that the computer be seized. But an appeals court reversed this and granted the authorization just seven minutes before the freighter was scheduled to sail last Friday, Mr. Walker said.

The United States coordinates export controls with its allies through a committee that includes most of the NATO nations and Japan. But Washington's list of restricted products is significantly more extensive than the schedule of restricted items that guides the allies. Because of this, high technology products, particularly American computers, frequently slip through those countries into the Eastern bloc, American officials maintain.

The proliferation of microelectronic equipment in recent years, much of it sold in the United States through retail or mail-order houses, has hampered efforts to keep the technology away from the Soviet Union, although there have been numerous seizures of high-tech equipment in the past two years, according to the Customs Service. Penalties for

those convicted can range up to a \$1 million fine and 10 years in jail.

The Treasury Department disclosed the seizure today amid a battle between the Reagan Administration and some House Democrats over the terms of a bill to renew the Government's authority to control the export of goods and technology. A House-passed bill, which is weaker than the Administration would like, curtails funds for the Customs Service's export control enforcement campaign.

In today's case, Customs officials said that the name of a fugitive, Richard Mueller, who has been wanted in another case involving illegal exports of electronic equipment, had been found on some documents pertaining to the computer shipment.

William Von Raab, the Commissioner of Customs, said Mr. Mueller, a West German national, was indicted by a Federal grand jury in California in 1979 in connection with an illegal shipment of semiconductor-manufacturing equipment from the Silicon Valley to the Eastern bloc. "He also has been implicated in several other export investigations," Mr. Von Raab said.

Mr. Walker said Mr. Mueller was connected to a firm in New York State that is a subject of the current investigation. He declined to name the firm, however, on the ground that search warrants were still being executed.
