

The Tragedy of “June 17”: East Germany’s “Workers’ Uprising” at Sixty

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The Teutonic Day of Infamy

An anniversary of a great importance that was once solemnly commemorated in the West, especially in divided Germany, the Cold War’s frontier — and scorned in the Communist world— passed last year with little notice. “*Der 17. Juni.*” “June 17”— was famous in the German-speaking world, just as well known as “December 7” or “September 11” have become to different generations of Americans. Like those two dates fixed in recent American history, “June 17” was a date for Germans that needed no year to identify it: everyone of a certain age regarded it as a symbol of moral courage and brave dissent. It was variously spoken in sad or wistful or even defiant tones, for it was a multivalent talisman: a testament to German working-class heroism, a mark of Communist treachery, a black book of Stalinist tyranny.

Sixty Junes ago, the world witnessed the first rebellion — a “workers’ uprising” — against communism. It was the first of many failed post- World War II efforts to overthrow the dictatorship of a one-party communist state, and it would be followed in succeeding decades by other vain attempts at liberation: the rebellions in Hungary and Poland in the fall of 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968, the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1980–81. Fittingly enough, at last, in October–November 1989, East Germany once again rose up and captured the world’s notice, staging yet another uprising by an intrepid *Volk*. Yet this time “the People” launched a successful rebellion, and the result – within little more than 2 years, effectively triggering a European domino effect — would witness not just the fall of the infamous Berlin Wall but also the overthrow (at least temporarily) of almost every

communist oligarchy in Eastern Europe. By December 1991, not only were there no more Soviet satellites, but even the once-mighty Soviet Union was no more. The so-called Iron Curtain had fully collapsed in the aftermath of the tremors issuing forth from the earthquake of the razed Berlin Wall.

A National Day of Mourning

If that was how it all ended, that is not at all how it commenced on June 17, 1953. For decades the date was famous—or rather infamous— as a tragicomic irony of proletarian impotence against the power of state socialism. It was long a “day of infamy” in Eastern Europe. For it did not successfully oust from East Germany the presence of Stalin’s occupying army. Nor did it overthrow his communist puppet government, represented by the so-called Socialist Unity Party in East Berlin.

Yet it did set in motion those forces that would three decades later send East Germans back into the streets to protest their oppression and the injustices of their hypocritical “workers’ state.” And eventually those demonstrations and marches in the streets of East Germany would lead to the miracle of an “Unbloody Revolution.” It would be the first of several communist governments to fall in Eastern Europe and usher in a much-proclaimed “New World Order.”

So “June 17” was voiced, by East Germans above all, in hushed tones during the 1950s and ‘60s. Felt with complex, mixed emotions, it was alternately a source of great satisfaction, given that it was an emblem of German intransigence against Soviet domination, and a cause for shame because, after all, the uprising did fail. In West Germany, beginning in the mid-1950s, June 17 was declared a national day of mourning. It remained as such until the mid-1970s, when the government of Chancellor Willy Brandt inaugurated a new epoch of détente with East Germany. It was a period of *rapprochement* that led to a thaw in the Cold War, and

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ultimately to the full recognition of the East German government by the Western powers and most other nations of the world. Today, historians look back on those events of six decades ago and identify them as the moment when the Communist dream of “equality for all” and the promise of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was blown to smithereens for all self-aware Germans. The same dialectic of hope and disillusion would play itself out in Eastern Europe thereafter in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and elsewhere, as one failed rebellion succeeded another.

Until finally, in the *annus mirabilis* of 1989–90 the workers united in opposition to “The Party” —and brought down the East German dictatorship without shedding a single drop of blood.

Yes, that was how it all ended in 1989. But how exactly did it all begin on that infamous day?

Really Existing Socialism

June 17, 1953. “*Ivan [the Russians] muss weg! Ivan muss weg!*” ring the shouts through the streets: “Ivan must go! Ivan must go!”

Seven a.m. Hundreds of workers from building site 40 are arguing in the Stalinallee—the newly constructed East German showcase, an area of apartments built with great fanfare as part of the National Reconstruction Program and as a 1952 birthday present to the great Stalin. Employing it as a stage for Party spectacles and Politburo photo opportunities, East German policymakers have decided to concentrate East Berlin’s reconstruction in this single planned area.

Now, however, the curtain is about to rise on a drama of bloody socialist realism that the planners haven’t planned, and it features real workers’ heroes, not the Party-sponsored proles officially exalted as “labor heroes” for exceeding the prescribed production norms.

Ten a.m. On East Berlin streets, in parks and vacant lots heaped with war rubble, astonished bystanders gape at the spectacle. The elated strikers stream along Unter den Linden, their chants peacefully reverberating through the air:

*Berliner, reiht euch ein,
Wir wollen freie Menschen sein!
[Berliners, join the ranks,
We want to be free people!]*

Thousands more fall in. At the State Opera House, 500 workmen climb down their scaffolds and swell the tide, their youth club members shrugging off their blue shirts and marching in step. At Humboldt University, dozens of male and female students spill into the procession; and so, incredibly, do 250 employees of the Friedrichshain office of the Inspector of Taxes.

Now the throng has swollen to 100,000, many of whose younger members had paraded in the 1951 World Festival of Youth and Students. Today East Berlin is witnessing primarily

a workers’ march, not a student demonstration; but it is also, in part, a youth protest. At the head of almost every column are men under the age of 25, who have been hurriedly chosen as the informal leaders of their workplaces’ strike committees.

Past the ubiquitous posters of Stalin and President Wilhelm Pieck the horde gushes, past the red streamers that proclaim: “German Youth United for Peace!” “The German Democratic Republic Is the Unshakable Bastion of World Peace!” “Only the Imperialists Stand Between You and a Happy Life!” Laughing bitterly, the protesters spit on the propaganda. Several house painters, brushes in hand, cover the posters with “*Nieder mit Ulbricht!*” (“Down with Ulbricht!”). They edit Party slogans, mischievously completing “Peace and Freedom” with “Through Free Elections” and changing “Solidarity with the USSR!” to “Solidarity with the German Working Class!”

Now the crowd reaches the new Soviet embassy on Unter den Linden. A pair of Soviet reconnaissance cars wheel to face the multitude; soldiers swing their machine guns to aim at, if above, the heads of the marchers. And yet, the atmosphere remains almost gay. For the marchers know that an unheard-of thing is happening: a demonstration against the government—indeed the makings of a general strike—is under way.

In the steady rain, the flood of sudden marchers rolls on. Along with 8,000 *Vopos [state police]*, hundreds of Soviet infantrymen and six Soviet mobile anti-aircraft trucks monitor its progress, weaving in and out of the swirling mass to contain and direct its flow.

East Berlin streets are teeming with marchers, but this improvised Wednesday demonstration, bubbling up just 3 months after Stalin’s death—does not express the official chant: “friendship toward the Soviet Union and world communism.” On the contrary: it is directed against the East German government, against the USSR, against the communist system.

In the gray morning rain, the construction workers end their debate and lay down their tools. The “men of Block 40” will walk. Their destination: Marx-Engels Platz, where they will present their grievances to the government. Immediately, other workers from the Stalinallee join them, and a corps of 10,000 workers—masons in white overalls, carpenters in black corduroy smocks, factory hands in worn boots and tattered suits—fall into an uneven beat.

“We want butter!” a call goes up. At once, 10,000 voices echo it. Another shout: “Down with the People’s Army!” It too is answered in turn. “Freedom! Freedom!” cries a third. “*Wir fordern freie Wahlen!*” (“We demand free elections!”). “*Wir wollen Butter statt Nationalarmee/Und endlich unsere Freiheit sehn!*” (“We want butter instead of the army/and at long last our freedom!”).

Down with the Hunger Regime!

11:30 a.m. Now the parade reaches the corner of Leipzigerstrasse and Friedrichstrasse, rapidly filling the Karl

Liebkecht Platz, site of several of the East German government government buildings. A sea of feisty marchers surrounds the House of Unity where East German government Central Committee members sit in their third-floor offices.

“*Freiheit!*” the demonstrators chant. “We demand the overthrow of the government!” “*Wir wollen keine Sklaven mehr sein!*” (“We won’t be slaves anymore!”). “*Wir sind so sehr verbittert, Dass uns der Regen nicht erschuettert!*” (“We’re so outraged/That a little rain won’t unsettle us!”).

The strikers call for the government leaders to come out and speak with them. No response. Taunts aimed at the government’s trio of leaders continue:

Ulbricht, Pieck, and Grotewohl
Wir haben von euch die Schnauze voll!
 [Ulbricht, Pieck, and Grotewohl
 We’re sick and tired of you!]

The government sends out a few minor officials to explain its policy, but their Marxist-Leninist jargon—*Partei chinesisch* [Party Chinese], in the workers’ contemptuous phrase—only aggravates the crowd. For 10 min, the marchers chant for the Party’s top leaders, the bearded Ulbricht and the bespectacled Grotewohl, and sometimes also for the paunchy Pieck, to appear:

Wir wollen den Spitzbart! Wir wollen die Brille! [We want Goatee! We want Four-Eyes!]
Spitzbart, Bauch, und Brille/Sind nicht des Volkes Wille!
 [Goatee, Fatso, and Four-Eyes/Are not the will of the People!]
Grotewohl und Ulbricht raus, Dann ist dieser Streik heraus! [Get rid of Grotewohl and Ulbricht/Then this strike will be over!]
Es hat keinen Zweck/der Spitzbart muss weg! [It’s hopeless/Goatee must go!]

To the amusement of the crowd, demonstrators hold up large posters of the East German government triumvirate, their names blacked out except for the surname initials, so that the letters spell out “G.P.U.”: the Soviet secret police.

But watchful Soviet officers are not amused. And as Soviet soldiers take up position near the House of Unity, the crowd starts to taunt them too, inverting anti-American slogans (“*Russkij Ivan—go home!*”) and even breaking out into the forbidden former national anthem, the Deutschlandlied:

Deutschland, Deutschland über alles/Über alles in der Welt.
 [Germany Germany above everything/Above everything in the world.]
 And then a long-suppressed undercurrent of anger surges to the surface and cries of frustration pour forth from the drenched and restless crowd.

Wir wollen Freiheit, wir wollen Brot/Wir treten den Kommunismus tot. [We want freedom, we want bread/ We will crush communism dead.]

Nieder mit der Hungerregierung! [Down with the hunger regime!]

The first brick breaks a government window.
 “*Ivan muss weg!*” “*Der Spitzbart muss weg!*”
 Now sticks and stones cascade off the walls.

Maintaining their position between the protesters and the government building, the East German police and Soviet security forces glare menacingly, but do not interfere. Checked, though unappeased, thousands of demonstrators simply move down the street, enter the big state-run department store. and begin to loot it. Two blocks from the House of Unity, on the Soviet side of Potsdamer Platz, and in full view of a lunch-time crowd of West Berliners, a group of marchers manages to light a bonfire, feeding it with portraits of Ulbricht and with East German government banners (“Forward to the Building Up of Socialism!”).

“D-Day X”

12:30 p.m. Above the cacophony of confusion comes a new sound: the leaden rattle of tank treads on cobblestones. “The Panzer are coming!” thousands shriek.

And as a dozen Soviet tanks turn onto the Leipzigerstrasse, and release their first rounds. History too seems to turn a corner, as the last flickering embers of the humanist tradition of German socialism are buried alive under the weight of Soviet aggression. That the Politburo leaders in the House of Unity in Karl Liebknecht Platz have called in Russian tanks to crush a German workers’ uprising must have left Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg writhing in their graves. And now it is clear, for all the world to see, that the Socialist Unity Party derives its authority from the Russian whip, not from the will of the East German people. In the showcase city of Soviet Europe, East Berlin, a bloodbath ensues that the West is able to watch from—quite literally—across the street.

Along Friedrichstrasse and other major streets roll 200 field-green Soviet T-34 medium tanks, emblazoned with the Red star and featuring 85-mm guns. Suddenly machine and submachine guns erupt everywhere; thousands of East German Police have just arrived to reinforce the Red Army. Horrified witnesses watching from West Berlin later report that while the Soviet soldiers seemed to aim above the crowd, the East German police fired point-blank at their countrymen.

2:30 p.m. Both the rain and the shooting have subsided. Dozens lie dead or injured in the streets. An additional 25,000 Soviet troops and 300 tanks—two entire armored divisions—are on the scene, along with thousands of local police as reinforcements.

The revolutionary “First German Workers’ and Peasants’ State” is saved!

Meanwhile, dank figures dart through the scorched and sodden streets, desperately seeking safety. Word spreads that all passages to West Berlin are being sealed off by the *Vopos* and Soviet troops: no escape, no asylum.

Evening. As the Western media honor—and mourn—the “rebellion in the rain” of June 17, the reprisals commence in the east. Suspects are rounded up; at dawn, the first group of “traitors” is marched to a little field near the Brandenburg Gate and, without a trial, set before a Soviet firing squad. Signs labeled “Hitlerite murderer” and “American spy” are hung around the necks of the executed. East German state radio terms the revolt “*Tag X*” (Day X), a second “D-Day invasion” to “overthrow the Workers’ and Peasants’ State,” lamely attributing it to the “hireling-provocateurs of war and instigators of excesses from the three powers in West Berlin.”

“D-Day X.” The final casualty total in Berlin: up to 300 dead, thousands injured.

Der 17. Juni. “Bloody Wednesday,” when Soviet tanks painted the town red, as the Western media proclaim. A deliberate allusion to “Bloody Sunday” in 1905, when Russian workers were butchered by the troops of the Czar. Young East Germans have learned in their school history classes since World War II about that popular revolt; they know that June 17 was a textbook re-enactment of Bolshevik prescriptions about worker’s revolutions. Indeed, the events of June 17 form the outline of a classic Marxist story: The People, oppressed by a hated government, rise up, confront it, and....

Yes; but this uprising was not made by the Communists; it was made against them. The despised troops were not those of some “capitalist” or “feudalist” state oppressor, but of the Red Army; the demonstrating workers were not chanting the slogans of communism, but for free elections, the battle cry of the Western democracies.

Der 17. Juni. In West Berlin, the Charlottenburger Chaussee, an avenue running up to the Brandenburg Gate, is renamed *Strasse des 17. Juni*; a cross is raised there to the memory of the fallen. In Bonn, the Bundestag declares June 17 a legal holiday, naming it the Day of National Unity.

Not According to the Official “Plan”

How, in the “workers’ paradise,” did it happen? And what were the immediate and long-term consequences for East German youth?

For most June 17 protesters, the chief issue was economic. In 1952, the East German government inaugurated its “Build Socialism” campaign, designed to implement the Five-Year Plan and aggressively promote East German heavy industry, but having the major effect of draining away manpower—chiefly young people under the age of 25—at the rate of more

than 20,000 workers per month. By 1953, East German citizens were facing hunger comparable only to the “starvation winter” of 1945/46, chiefly because of colossal agricultural mismanagement—in a region that was once the breadbasket of all Germany—as well as the relentless concentration on heavy industry at the expense of consumer goods desperately needed by East Germans. The standard of living in East Germany was at least 40 % below that of West Germany, which itself was just beginning to ascend from the depths of World War II.

Stalin’s death in March 1953, however, ushered in a liberalized “Thaw” in the USSR. The East Germans, under Soviet prodding, introduced an equivalent policy that abandoned the accelerated program to “build socialism” in favor of a so-called New Course of greater emphasis on consumer goods, raised living standards, greater cultural freedom, and conciliation toward dissident groups. And so, on June 10, 1953, the East German government promised numerous concessions, among them a lowering of high crop quotas, a return of confiscated property to homecoming refugees, an easing of curbs on travel, and amnesty for some political prisoners.

One concession Ulbricht did not make, however, angered East German workers. A recently instituted and much-hated item in the “Build Socialism” program had been raised work norms for construction workers, which amounted to a 10 % increase in hours for the same pay. That was bad enough. But on June 15, when the Block 40 construction workers in the Stalinallee housing project received their pay, the wage stubs showed that, though the workers were doing more work, they were actually receiving up to a third *less* pay. Chronic dissatisfaction turned to outrage, and some of the workers decided, then and there, to march the following day to the Leipzigerstrasse and protest directly to the government. At one P.M. on June 16—with the last-minute tacit approval of the East German government, which wanted to show the West that it could accept and heed workers’ criticisms—a band of 70 men began to march. But a few blocks later, other workers fell in, up to 3,000 of them. Word of the Block 40 protest had gotten around. That wasn’t part of the East German government “plan” either.

The regional police radioed for instructions; they were ordered to let the demonstration proceed without interference. That afternoon, police loudspeaker vans rode through the city, announcing the cancellation of the norm increases.

The Party’s contribution to the strike “planning” ended on June 16, but the easily won concession didn’t satisfy the workers. On the contrary. Smelling Ulbricht’s weakness amid the uncertainty of the post-Stalinist transition, the Stalinallee workers felt ready to take on the government. Emboldened, they decided that evening to march the next day and express their *political* grievances.

And they were not alone, for June 17 would be a day of revolt in more than East Berlin. On the night of June 16, citizens throughout East Germany listened to West Berlin

radio reports about the Stalinallee strikers and their victory; it was well known that these men were *Aktivisten*, elite workers hand-picked for their loyalty and efficiency. The conclusion was inescapable: If even the Stalinallee workers are discontented, things are bad indeed; if they can win concessions through protest against the regime, so can we. Spontaneously, workers across the land employed in the state-owned firms, known as SAGs (*Sowjetische Aktiengesellschaften*, Soviet Joint-Stock Companies), decided overnight to strike.

The (Dis)Solution?

And so, as the day of June 17 dawned, the East German government had more to cope with than just a few thousand disgruntled construction workers in East Berlin. At Merseburg, the 28,000 workers in the Walter Ulbricht Leuna Works, East Germany's largest chemical plant, went out on strike. At Halle, 18,000 workers set fire to the synthetic petroleum plant and struck. At Aue, 100,000 workers in the uranium mines walked away from work after destroying the shafts and flooding the mines. In many towns, strikers marched to the jails and freed any remaining political prisoners.

In all, according to Western figures, 372,000 workers and several thousand pupils demonstrated on June 17 against the government in 274 cities and towns throughout East Germany. On this day East German workers rose like Spartacus and his gladiators, unleashing their contempt for the Kremlin's puppet rulers with a fury that made a mockery of the trumped-up "World Peace and Friendship" petitions signed by millions of youth.

Even a few schoolchildren protested. Pictures of Party leaders were ripped from some classroom walls; teachers and pupils marched together against the government. In one school, students formed a committee and issued demands: dismiss two East German government loyalist teachers immediately, exclude the youth from all participation in academic affairs, free history teaching from communist ideology, and drop Russian as a compulsory subject. On June 18, police arrested five of the student committee members. Released a few days later, they fled immediately to West Berlin. But most East German youths remained loyal to the government. Indeed, in the aftermath of June 17, 44 youths throughout the East German received the highest JP medal—for informing on demonstrators—like the Child Spies in George Orwell's *1984*.

The universities, which had largely remained "quiet" on June 17—most professors had remained "loyal to the regime" and had not participated in any strikes or demonstrations—now delivered declarations of support. The rector of Berlin University expressed the professoriat's "fervent wish to help" the regime. Scattered professors voiced reservations: e.g., at the Technical College in Dresden, a few faculty gave only "a weak declaration" of faith in the East German government; the dean of the theological school of the Martin

Luther University in Halle withdrew his signature from a university-wide, pro-Ulbricht statement.

Similarly, a few isolated exceptions to the general quietude occurred among the students. A university student in Halle was a member of the strike committee in one factory; four students joined the strike committee at the Martin Luther University in Halle, and one university instructor in the Agriculture Department was executed for his support of the agitators. In Rostock, 100 students participated in anti-Soviet activities. By and large, however, students in both the universities and the schools remained docile; their moderate response on June 17 showed how far the East German government had come in getting East German education under its control.

Ulbricht recognized that the political situation was unstable, especially outside education. Again proceeding by the Leninist tactic of "one step backward, two steps forward," he attempted to appease the nation by increasing food rations temporarily; then he set out to punish the rioters and discipline "soft" East German government members. The East German government's New Course of liberalization and conciliation was, at least unofficially, ended. By week's end, 30 East Germans had been executed; at least 10,000 "provocateurs" had been jailed. In the next 4 months, production norms were restored to their former levels and the secret police reinforced. As Soviet tanks continued to patrol the streets, 422 people would be sentenced to death or to long prison terms at hard labor; more than 7,000 disappeared without a trial. The 145,000 *Vopos* were soon purged of those who had been reluctant to shoot unarmed protesters; Party rolls were slashed by 150,000, and even top government officials, including leading Politburo members, were fired.

The poet-dramatist Bertolt Brecht, a hard-nosed exponent of *Realpolitik* and Party discipline, had ambivalently supported Ulbricht in a sharply worded letter; later he wrote, in "The Solution," a sardonic epitaph on June 17 and the regime's legitimacy:

. . . the People
Had lost the government's trust,
And . . . it could be restored
Only by redoubled work.
Would it not have been simpler
If the government had dissolved the People
And elected another?

From 1953 to 1989: "Flights" of Passage

"*Der Ivan geht nie weg*," resigned East Germans now whispered: "Ivan will never go away."

So instead, millions of East Germans did. Although two million eastern Germans had already fled since 1945, the

exodus now assumed the urgency of a mass evacuation: 331,390 left in 1953, almost as many as in the previous 2 years combined. And still the flight continued: 184,198 in 1954; 252,870 in 1955; 279,189 in 1956; 261,622 in 1957; 204,092 in 1958; 143,917 in 1959; and 199,218 in 1960, the final year of relatively open access to West Berlin. Throughout the 1950s, East German citizens, especially East German youth, continued to flee the country—at a cost to the East German state of billions annually. One of every two exiting East Germans was under 25 years old.

East German government leaders failed to grasp that the uprising of June 17 and the unceasing youth exodus portended the definitive passing of communism's ideological appeal to new East German generations and thus also of its viable historical moment. Instead they redoubled their efforts to rear model young communists: their campaign to “Stalinize” Germans into “little comrades.”

Nevertheless, despite the raging, nationwide discontent and the constant manpower drain imposed by its ideological campaign, East German policymakers followed their hard-line

course throughout the 1950s. History was still on their side, the East German leadership erroneously believed; it was all just a matter of time—and “re-education.” The 1954 elections went off smoothly and the returns were better than ever: a record 99.3 % “yes” vote.

And even though the erection of the Berlin Wall would soon mar the show, little did Party leaders realize after the Workers' Uprising and near-perfect election vote of 1954 that, exactly half a lifetime on – thirty-five years later in November 1989 – History would turn on them with a vengeance.

The hated Wall would totter and fall like Humpty Dumpty, shattered into a thousand pieces, never to be put back together again.

John Rodden, senior editor of *Society*, is the author of a quartet of books on modern Germany, including *Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse: A History of East German Education* (2002); *Textbook Reds: Ideology, Schoolbooks, and National Identity* (2006); *The Walls That Remain: Eastern and Western Germans Since Reunification* (2009); and *Dialectics, Dogmas, and Dissent: Stories of Human Rights Abuse in Eastern Germany* (2012).