

The Triumph of Nonviolence in Leipzig (Retrospective account, 1990)

Abstract

A contemporary witness recounts the events of Monday, October 9th in Leipzig, beginning with the GDR regime's early-morning preparations for the city-wide demonstrations scheduled for later that day. As author Wolfgang Schneider recalls, local communist authorities and police forces anticipated violence and prepared themselves accordingly. In the end, however, 70,000 "fearful yet unyielding" demonstrators remained calm and peaceful in the face of massive security forces, and local leaders opted for restraint. This opened the door for further protests under the slogan "we are the people."

Source

A great deal has been written and even more has been speculated about the course of events on that fateful Monday. It is still unclear whether a special order to shoot was in place on October 9th in Leipzig. The clarification of this question, still pending, is not even of decisive historical relevance, since Secret Order No. 8/89 (decreed on September 26 by the Chair of the National Defense Council, Erich Honecker) was still in force with no restrictions. With respect to the expected "riots," it clearly stated, "They are to be prevented from the start." And there was yet another clear instruction: "hostile actions should be prevented offensively."

Just how literally the Leipzig police leadership, chaired by the acting 1st Secretary of the SED district leadership, Helmut Hackenberg, took this order was already evident early that morning. Factory employees were warned against entering the downtown area after 4pm; mothers were supposed to pick up their children from inner-city day care centers and kindergartens by 3pm; schoolchildren and students were threatened with expulsion should they participate in "actions." The city was abuzz with rumors. There were furtive whispers about gunmen on centrally located buildings, fears about the deployment of paratroopers, and it was understood that the NVA^[1] helicopter squadron in Cottbus had been put into "command-readiness." Reports about security-force bases in Küchenholz and Rosental were more reliable, as were those on preparations being made at the agra fairground in nearby Markkleeberg for the internment of "the delivered" (this had already been rehearsed on October 7). Churches were to be kept open for escapees, and a medical station was set up in St. Thomas posthaste. Emergency beds were set up in hospitals, and particular attention was given to the staffing of surgical and intensive care stations. Thousands of additional units of stored blood were ready and waiting. [...]

That day Leipzig resembled an armed camp. According to later testimony from the riot police, officers had been told that morning that a peaceful outcome to the demonstrations was unlikely, and that they should prepare for possible acts of violence. Accordingly, they wore riot gear: helmets with visors and neck protection, shields, gas masks (tear gas had been acquired in large quantities), truncheons, and so-called RKWs^[2]; officers were armed with pistols, and dog teams were also deployed. On the courtyard of the VP^[3] District Authority, "munitioned up" armored trucks stood ready, huge steel giants with bulldozing capacity; the drivers were armed with submachine guns and sixty shots of ammunition apiece. The police troop numbered three thousand men, twelve hundred of whom had been brought over from the Halle and Neubrandenburg districts. In addition, there were five squadrons of Factory Combat Groups [*Betriebskampfgruppen*] and a special police task force from the Ministry for State Security. The number of those called in ran into the four figures, and their arsenals contained more than

just handguns. [...]

Six important Leipzig personalities issued a call for calm, which was read aloud during peace devotions in St. Nicholas Church [*Nikolaikirche*] and three other churches: "Our common concern and responsibility has brought us together here today. We are taken aback by the developments in our city and are searching for a solution. We all need a free exchange of views about the continuing development of socialism in our country. Therefore, the public figures whose names are being read today promise all citizens that they will apply their full power and authority to advancing this dialogue, not only within the district of Leipzig, but also with our government. We urgently request that you remain calm, so that a peaceful dialogue is possible."

This joint appeal by cabaret artist Bernd-Lutz Lange, *Gewandhaus* music director Kurt Masur, and theologian Peter Zimmermann, along with secretary of the SED district leadership Kurt Meyer, Jochen Pommert, and Roland Wötzel was also broadcast at 6pm by the *Sender Leipzig* television station and about an hour later by the local radio station. This request to speak, as committed as it was courageous, undoubtedly contributed to the day's peaceful development, though it did not play the decisive role prematurely attributed to it. Only the concentrated power of the 70,000 fearful yet unyielding people who occupied the downtown and lined the city ring forced the ultimate retreat of the armed units at around 6:25pm. It was undoubtedly these anonymous people that Christof Hein had in mind when he proposed naming Leipzig the GDR's "City of Heroes" –

On October 9th in Leipzig, the German Democratic Revolution of 1989 triumphed. On that Monday, the cry "We are the people" became the material force that gave rise to and accelerated every hesitant concession by the party and government from that point on." [...]

NOTES

- [1] [Ⓝ] NVA [*Nationale Volksarmee*]: literally, National People's Army – trans.
- [2] ^{ⓂⓂ} RKW [*Reizwurfkörper*]: CS gas projectiles – trans.
- [3] ^{ⓂⓂⓂ} VP [*Volkspolizei*]: People's Police – trans.

Source: Preface (pp. 7–8), "Oktoberrevolution 1989", from *Leipziger Demontagebuch. Zusammengestellt und mit einer Chronik von Wolfgang Schneider*, Aufbau Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin 1990 (the original edition was published in 1990 by Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag; Gustav Kiepenheuer is an imprint of Aufbau Verlag GmbH & Co. KG); the original German text was reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, eds., *Das gespaltene Land. Leben in Deutschland 1945–1990*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1993, pp. 438–40.

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