

Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, “Stones against Red Tanks” (June 25, 1953)

Abstract

In the Federal Republic, the workers’ uprising on June 17, 1953, was seen as a testimony to the complete failure of the Communist regime in the GDR and as evidence of the East German population’s unbroken desire for freedom and unity with West Germans. For West German journalist Marion Dönhoff, the uprising was a “sign of hope” – one that put German unity back on the political agenda. As early as July 3, 1953, the Bundestag acted on her suggestion to make June 17th a national holiday. Until unification, it was celebrated with an annual memorial service in the Bundestag.

Source

On June 17, 1953, tens of thousands of workers in East Berlin and other GDR cities demonstrated against the SED leadership. The uprising was bloodily suppressed – and yet it was still a sign of hope.

When Parisians stormed the Bastille on July 14, 1789, killing 98 people and freeing seven prisoners in the process, they had no inkling that this day would become the symbol of the French Revolution. It became that symbol even though all the crucial events – the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the drafting of a new constitution, and the abolition of the monarchy came only later, in some cases many years later. One day, June 17, 1953, will go down – and perhaps not only in Germany history – as a great, a symbolic day. We should already declare it the National Day of German Unity. For on this June 17th, something happened that we all had thought was impossible.

Nietzsche had already said: “But the person who has first learned to stoop down and to bow his head before the ‘Power of History,’ finally nods his agreement mechanically, in the Chinese fashion, to that power . . . and moves his limbs precisely to the beat of strings plucked by ‘some’ power or other.”

Hadn’t we long resigned ourselves to the power of the totalitarian apparatus, against which every revolt seemed useless? Hadn’t many of us regarded the youth born into Hitler’s total state and raised in the SED’s total state as lost? And now?

Now came June 17. That morning, a few construction workers on Berlin’s Stalinallee had revolted against the increase in work quotas. A protest march formed spontaneously, initially without any real goal or organization. Hundreds joined; soon there were thousands, tens of thousands and more. After 24 hours, East Berlin was in open revolt. With no weapons, only sticks and stones, the workers faced off against the Russian tanks. In Leipzig, the Leuna Works burned, in Magdeburg the prison was stormed . . . Strikes in the shipyards, strike at Zeiß-Jena, on all train routes, in the coal and uranium mines. State-owned stores, police stations, and propaganda offices went up in flames. Some members of the People’s Police [*Volkspolizei*] allowed themselves to be disarmed without resistance. A female worker who had fled Magdeburg described how city residents had stormed the police headquarters. Members of the People’s Police had opened the gates, handed over their weapons, and taken off their uniforms. “I saw how officers of the People’s Police who had resisted the workers’ advance were thrown from the windows of the second floor and beaten.”

It began as a demonstration and turned into a revolution! The first truly German revolution, carried out

by workers who rose up against the Communist workers' paradise, who confronted the People's Police and the Red Army with nothing but their bare hands, and who are now at the mercy of the Soviet functionaries. Street by street, house by house, the search is on for provocateurs and persons who are not staying at their registered addresses.

In East Berlin alone, several thousand people were detained after the uprising, some in schools that had been turned into makeshift jails. A great many very young people are among them. The list of "convicted provocateurs" published by the SED medium shows that the majority of them were born between 1933 and 1936. This is the youth they wanted us to believe had lost the sense of freedom.

Blood was shed – perhaps a lot of it. A state of emergency was imposed, and in places where Communist mayors had ruled up to that point, the Red Army is in power again, like in 1945. East Berlin's mayor Ebert declared: "With their vigorous and very circumspect intervention, our Soviet friends have done a great service to us and the cause of peace." This is the only voice from the circle of "German" government functionaries, against whom the revolt was primarily directed. A revolution, then, that has led to nothing?

No, that is not the case. On the contrary, this revolution has had a very important outcome. Berlin's workers have accomplished what British diplomacy and American efforts were unable to bring about: on the eve of the Four-Power Talks, they have shown the entire world the weakness of the foundation supporting the power of the Kremlin and its instruments in East Germany (and presumably in all people's democracies). It has become clear that this territory, as whose advocate and patron saint they like to style themselves, hates and despises them whole-heartedly, indeed, that they cannot rely even on the People's Police. Moreover, it has become evident that with the right instinct for the totalitarian regime's moments of weakness, one can inflict heavy blows on it – not to mention that this system has suffered a complete shipwreck: politically, economically, and psychologically. Finally, one more thing has become very clear to everyone, namely that German unity must now be the most important step in subsequent political developments.

That 17th of June has revealed a picture that can no longer be erased: the radiant faces of those Germans who lived for years in apprehension and bondage and who suddenly, as though intoxicated, rose up, tore down the foreign placards, burned the red flags, demanded a free vote on reunification . . . And who now quietly return to their workplaces again, filled with new anxieties. Many of us in the Federal Republic may have only realized during these days that what is happening over there concerns us all, and not only the people who are engaged in the negotiations. June 17th has provided irrefutable proof that German unity is a historical necessity. We know now that the day will come when Berlin is the German capital once again. The East German workers have restored this faith to us, and faith is the highest degree of certainty.

For a moment, there was the question of the Soviet response: would it be a continuation of the change in course or intensified terror? A decision has been made in favor of a change in course. Let us listen to the declarations by the central organ of the SED after those events. The paper *Neues Deutschland* wrote on June 18: "Of course we, the party of the working class, must ponder the weighty question of how it could come to pass that significant segments of Berlin's working population – undoubtedly honorable and well-intentioned people – were filled with such discontent that they failed to notice how they were being used by fascist powers? There is no doubt that our party is guilty of serious shortcomings here. It must learn to respect the masses much more, to listen to what they have to say, to be concerned about their daily lives."

On June 22, the SED Central Committee clearly stated in conclusion that "when masses of workers misunderstand the party, it is the fault of the party, not the workers." Under the chairmanship of Minister President Grotewohl, a number of concessions were made to the population in the context of pursuing the "New Course." The Kremlin thus wants to continue making the Eastern Zone "annexable" because it

wants the neutralization of all of Germany [*Gesamtdeutschland*] in return. Reimann stated this very clearly in his press conference in Bonn on June 18, the day after the uprising, by quoting once again – nearly verbatim – the passage that runs like a red thread through the four Soviet notes of last year as the primary demand. The basis of the peace treaty, he said, must be that “Germany will not enter into any military alliances or coalitions that are aimed against states that were at war with Germany.”

Things must not be looking too good for Moscow if it is willing to suffer this Berlin setback – which is likely to have repercussions for the satellite states – for the sake of the potential European Defense Community. We know, however, how quickly the Soviet reinforcement divisions were catapulted across the Oder last week. This shall be a warning to us. Germany as a whole shall not be forced to defend itself one day with stones against red tanks – like the Germans in the Eastern Zone.

Source: Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, “Steine gegen rote Panzer”, *Die Zeit* (June 25, 1953).

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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