

An East German Rock ‘n’ Roll Riot at the Wall Turns Political (June 10, 1987)

Abstract

When the rhythms of Western rock groups like Genesis and David Bowie floated across the Wall, they sparked rock riots on the Eastern side. Angry fans scuffled with the People’s Police [*Volkspolizei*]. They called for reforms in the style of Gorbachev and an opening of the border.

Source

East German Police, Rock Fans Clash in Berlin for the Third Straight Night

BERLIN—for the third straight night, hundreds of young pop music fans clashed early Tuesday with the East German police, who tried to bar them from listening to a concert just across the Berlin Wall.

It was the most serious outbreak of public discontent in East Berlin in nearly 10 years.

The police arrested several dozen young people along the Unter den Linden boulevard, the main thoroughfare, wrestling them into police cars and occasionally beating them with nightsticks.

The East German authorities denied Tuesday that there had been any clashes between young people and the police but said there had been Western attempts to provoke trouble.

The official ADN news agency said reports by Western correspondents of angry confrontations between the police and thousands of young people were “horror tales.”

“There can be no question of clashes between youths and police,” the ADN statement said. “They exist only in the fantasy of some Western correspondents who drive to and fro over the border with the aim of creating sensations.”

The young people, mostly in their 20s or late teens, chanted “Gorbachev! Gorbachev!” in an evident appeal to the authorities in East Germany, an orthodox-minded communist state, to copy some of the Soviet leader’s reforms aimed at easing restrictions on expression.

The demonstrators tossed small firecrackers and empty wine bottles over lines of green-uniformed police officers and plainclothes agents, who blocked them at several points from coming any closer than 400 yards (365 meters) to the Berlin Wall.

Just beyond the Wall, the British rock group Genesis and its star, Phil Collins, were performing on the last night of a three-night rock festival in West Berlin.

“The Wall must go!” and “Down with the pigs!” the young people also shouted.

The three nights of disturbances were the most serious in East Berlin since a clash following a rock concert in October 1977. Four persons reportedly died in that confrontation.

The incidents came at a particularly embarrassing time for East Germany, which has sought to use this year’s 750th anniversary of Berlin to highlight the country’s successes. East Germany enjoys one of the highest standards of living in Eastern Europe and has shown few signs of political instability.

The street confrontations are likely to sharpen the dilemma facing the East German president, Erich Honecker, who has resisted Mikhail S. Gorbachev's appeals for greater openness and democracy in communist societies, Western diplomats said.

The East German authorities fear that an easing of restrictions on the media or on public debate could be more disruptive than in other East European countries, according to the diplomats and other political observers. That is because East Germans, with ready access to West German television and radio and with family and historical ties to West Germany, are more likely than other East Europeans to expect Western-style freedoms, they said.

[...]

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