

Ernst Thälmann and Willy Leow at the Head of a Red Front Fighters' League Demonstration in Berlin (June 1927)

Abstract

The Red Front Fighters' League [*Roter Frontkämpferbund* or RFB] was a paramilitary organization founded by the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in 1924. The formation of party-affiliated troops was by no means unusual in the Weimar Republic. The SPD had earlier founded the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, while conservative and nationalist parties maintained organizations such as Stahlhelm or the SA. These paramilitary groups pursued radically different political goals and often clashed in violent brawls. What they had in common was their military appearance, including a penchant for uniforms, and their inclination to march in large parades, often accompanied by a marching band, as can be seen in this picture. After one particular RFB mass rally escalated into a violent confrontation with the police, the government banned the league nationwide. It continued to exist illegally until the National Socialists eventually destroyed it after their rise to power.

This picture, which was taken during a mass rally in Berlin in June 1927, shows the chairman of both the RFB and the KPD, Ernst Thälmann (left), and Willy Leow (right), deputy chairman of the RFB and Thälmann's right-hand man. Like Thälmann, Leow (1887-1937), a carpenter from Brandenburg, had grown up in a working-class milieu. Like many other German communists, he first became active in the labor movement organized by the SPD and the labor unions. He then drifted further left to the USPD and eventually joined the KPD upon its founding. He quickly rose through the party ranks and was a member of the Reichstag from 1928 until 1933. Threatened by the National Socialist persecution of communists, he fled Germany for France in 1933 and eventually went to the Soviet Union. In 1936, however, he was arrested in the course of the Stalinist purges, sentenced to death for "organizing a Trotskyist-terrorist group," and executed. While Thälmann was later celebrated as a hero of the Communist resistance in the GDR, Leow's end did not fit in with GDR historiography, which is why he was usually removed from this picture in official GDR publications.

Source



Source: Ernst Thälmann (l.) and Willy Leow at the head of the demonstration procession. 3rd Reich Meeting of the RFB from June 5-6, 1927 in Schiller Park in Berlin-Wedding. BA, Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst - Zentralbild, Bild 183-Z0127-305. Available online on Wikimedia Commons:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ABundesarchiv_Bild_183-Z0127-305%2C_Berlin_1927%2C_Reichstreffen_RFB%2C_Th%C3%A4lmann%2C_Leow.jpg

Bundesarchiv

Recommended Citation: Ernst Thälmann and Willy Leow at the Head of a Red Front Fighters' League Demonstration in Berlin (June 1927), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:image-4039>> [March 16, 2026].