

Newsreel Report on the January Uprising in Berlin (1919)

Abstract

These scenes from early January 1919 show some of the clashes instigated by armed revolutionary soldiers and civilians who advocated a socialist republic organized around workers' and soldiers' councils, rather than a nationwide election for a National Assembly to govern the country and draft a new constitution. The uprising began on January 5, precipitated by the Prussian government's decision to fire a far-left politician, Emil Eichhorn (USPD), from his position as Berlin's Chief of Police, which he had only held for two months. The government accused Eichhorn of having supported a revolutionary group of mutinying sailors instead of the provisional government during a December disturbance two weeks earlier. In a much larger sense, though, the January street-fighting reflected a violent continuation of the deep and passionate debate on the German political left over whether the country should pursue a moderate path toward a parliamentary democracy or a more radical one toward a socialist system oriented around local councils. By the evening of January 5, armed insurgents had occupied the offices of the SPD newspaper *Vorwärts* as well as those of the other leading newspapers in the capital, and a revolutionary committee under the leadership of Karl Liebknecht and Otto Ledebour had issued a statement that unilaterally pronounced the provisional Council of People's Deputies illegitimate and thus deposed. After initial negotiations between the Social Democratic government and the insurrectionists to find a peaceful resolution had broken down, the provisional head of Germany's defense ministry, Gustav Noske (SPD), ordered the country's army—as well as units of the Freikorps—to put down the uprising by force. The heaviest fighting lasted until January 12, but continued violence—including the Freikorps's assassination of the two leading far-left politicians, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht—dominated headlines well past the middle of the month. The film company *Messter-Woche* produced a special edition of its weekly newsreel in order to cover these events, serving as a critical source of information at a time when the daily newspapers themselves could not publish due to the revolutionaries' occupation of their presses.

Source

Intertitles:

Fighting at the Brandenburg Gate. Government troops are moving in for reinforcement. The troops are swarming out onto Pariser Platz.

The Mosse House after its capture. Barricades in front of the main entrance with government troops. Machine guns positioned behind the building's windows.

Removal of wounded from the combat zone at Donhoffplatz.

The *Vorwärts* building after having come under fire.

Barricades in the courtyard of the *Vorwärts* building.

The fire that broke out at the *Vorwärts* after the building was shot at.

The headquarters of the Spartacists, the police headquarters at Alexanderplatz, after its capture.

<https://digitaler-lesesaal.bundesarchiv.de/video/13073/630631>

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