

Turbulent Days in Berlin: The January Uprising (1919)

Abstract

This 1919 documentary captures some of the dramatic events that unfolded during the “Spartacist Uprising” (also known as the January Uprising) in Berlin, just two weeks before Germany’s first national elections since the war. The far-left Spartacists believed that middle-class interests would invariably dominate the voting and prevent a genuine improvement in workers’ lives, and so they increasingly pushed for a renewed revolution as the only way to achieve lasting change. On January 5, the Spartacist firebrand Karl Liebknecht rallied his supporters to seize the government by force, which unleashed a week of street fighting, sniper fire, and armed occupation of buildings. Gustav Noske (SPD), the provisional head of Germany’s military, responded with extraordinary force, supplementing the government’s available army units with additional detachments of far-right, ultra-nationalist irregulars, known as *Freikorps*, who went after the Spartacists with both zeal and impunity. This included the extrajudicial murders of Liebknecht and fellow Spartacist leader Rosa Luxemburg on January 15, after the uprising had already collapsed. German Communists, who had just founded the KPD two weeks earlier in a union of the Spartacists and several other small far-left organizations, quickly elevated Liebknecht and Luxemburg to the status of martyrs, and the symbolic resonance of their murders only further embittered Communists toward the Republic and the SPD. That bitterness impeded cooperation on a host of political issues and social concerns that the two parties otherwise shared. More catastrophically, it contributed to the unwillingness of the SPD and KPD to form a united front in 1932 against the Nazis, who posed an existential threat to them both.

The company that produced this film, the Deutsche Lichtbild-Gesellschaft (Deulig), had first started operations in 1916 to generate propaganda for Germany during the war. The far-right business tycoon and media entrepreneur Alfred Hugenberg played a central role in Deulig’s founding and continued to shape its newsreel content and conservative editorial slant throughout the Weimar Republic.

Source

Intertitles:

A huge demonstration in Greater Berlin for the Ebert-Scheidemann government on January 6, 1919

They have come by the hundreds of thousands to protect the government and save the fatherland from revolution and anarchy, from misery and ruin

The enormous masses of government demonstrators gradually fill Wilhelmplatz and Wilhelmstraße.

In front of the Reich Chancellery: People's Representative Scheidemann's speech on freedom and justice, peace and bread.

Simultaneous speech by People's Representative Ebert from another window of the Reich Chancellery.

The soldiers loyal to the government follow Ebert's request to gather at Voßstraße for the immediate protection of the government.

The counter-demonstration of the independents and Spartacists.

Demonstration of the unemployed in front of the Bismarck monument under the sign of Spartacus.

In expectation of unrest, the guard at the Reich Chancellor's Palace is reinforced by the "Suppegarde" (a military organization of former active non-commissioned officers).

The Brandenburg Gate defended by elements of the rapidly organized "Republican Guard"

Ammunition transport for the "Red Fortress", as the police headquarters was quickly dubbed by the people as the stronghold of Spartacus

Spartacists block off Hallesches Tor

The "Red Fortress" sends a heavily armed truck to reinforce the newspaper district

A line of Spartacists standing guard on Lindenstraße, which they have blocked off.

"Shots fired!" Passers-by flee

A truck carrying government troops rushes to attack in one of the endangered streets of the newspaper district

The Mosse House with its defenses shortly before the storming

Paramedics eager to help.

Spartacus surrenders! The defenders of the Mosse House raise the white flag

The badly damaged corner of the Mosse House after its capture by government troops

Barricades made of rolls of newspaper in front of the entrances to the Mosse House on Schützenstraße

The Spartacists' defenses in the Wolff Telegraph Bureau (W.T.B.) on Zimmerstraße

Barricades made of rolls of paper in front of the main entrance of the W.T.B.

A wooden barricade that the government troops have erected at the corner of Friedrichstrasse and Kochstrasse for the attack against the Ullstein House

The front of the *Vorwärts* building after artillery bombardment

Effect of a mine that has penetrated the *Vorwärts* building from the roof to the cellar

Source: *Stürmische Tage in Berlin*, documentary, Deutsche Lichtbildgesellschaft, 1919. Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv Film ID: 7615. <https://digitaler-lesesaal.bundesarchiv.de/video/7615/660168>

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