

The 1953 revolt in East Germany: violence and betrayal

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History hangs heavy on Germany: there is so much of it, and understanding even its more dramatic aspects is often not easy. The uprising in East Germany [1] (the German Democratic Republic) in June 1953 – brutally suppressed by the communist authorities with 170 executions for political crimes, 123 for other ‘crimes’, connected to the protests, in addition to the scores of victims shot down in the street – is a case in point.

The basic fact that the events started with a strike on 16 June by construction workers building the new Stalinallee [2] in East Berlin, is not in question. But was it just a protest against the raising of ‘output norms’ as the strike leaders claimed? After all, the protest spread quickly from Berlin itself – where the Soviet authorities declared a state of siege – to all the major East German industrial centres, including Magdeburg, Leipzig and Dresden [3].

Communist leaders at the time certainly claimed that it was far more than industrial action, denouncing it as an ‘attempted *coup d’état* against the government of the GDR, supported by western intelligence’ – and acted accordingly. Yet if it was an attempted coup, why was no hard evidence of this adduced at the time, or subsequently?

In my view, there is compelling evidence to show that the unrest became much more than just a strike and that it was a significant attempt by some very brave men and women to rid themselves of communism. At the same time, while it was spontaneous and unplanned, it had – even more remarkably – a secondary, hidden goal: German reunification [4]. All this, some thirty-six years before the successors of the 1953 demonstrators made another effort at the same goal – and this time met with success.

The German Democratic Republic: a state of violence

In June 1953, there was much for the East Germans to rise up against. The GDR was plainly far from ‘democratic’, and as a Soviet puppet, not ‘German’ either (though it managed to exploit some of the worst features of German militarism and authoritarianism). As I show in my book, The Stasi Files [5] – *East Germany’s Secret Operations against Britain*, the GDR was primarily a totalitarian police state, with a government kept in power by a terrorising security and intelligence service.

The Staatssicherheit [6] (state security service, or Stasi) was not yet the giant it became in the 1980s, when some 12% of East Germans were in some way collaborating with it. But even then it had enormous power that would grow over time; in the GDR by 1985 there was one Stasi officer to every 180 citizens.

Despite the view of history propagated by its own ideologues, it is clear that communism was imposed on the East Germans by violence. Some 200,000 of them died directly or indirectly as a result of communist policies carried out between 1945 and 1989 – 1% of the entire population.

173,000 died from 1945 to 1953 alone; of these, some 90,000 died either from execution or as the result of deliberate starvation and inhuman treatment.

At the end of the 1941-45 war, as many as two million East German women were raped by Soviet soldiers, one estimate being that 200,000 died as a direct result. 25,000 people perished in GDR prisons from 1949 (when the state was founded) until 1990. This was a state created from, and sustained by, force and violence.

The precise timing of the June 1953 revolt was significant. The cold war had been raging for at least four years when – on 10 March 1953 – the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin [7] died. A terrible dictator had gone, and at a very sensitive geo-political moment. In 1952 Stalin had, in two notes, re-opened the question of German nationalism by offering to permit a united Germany, apparently on the basis of free elections, in return for its neutrality. No less a figure than Winston Churchill, the British prime minister, thought this a proposal worth exploring.

The Soviets had good reasons for making this offer. Political oppression, allied to the forced collectivisation of East German agriculture and the creeping state take-over of its industry, had caused more than 500,000 East Germans to flee west since 1951. Understandably, some of the Soviet leadership came to believe that East Germany was heading for 'internal catastrophe'. A neutral Germany might be better than two German states, one strong and allied to the west, the other weak and a millstone around Russia's neck.

Whether Stalin actually believed in giving up Soviet control over East Germany is doubtful (his fantastical expectation was that his offers might fool the west into accepting a united Germany that could then be pulled into the communist orbit) but after his death, some of those competing to succeed him sincerely questioned whether holding on to the Germans was worth the strategic and financial cost.

Lavrenti Beria [8], for example, argued on 27 May 1953 that the Soviets should abandon East Germany. 'The GDR' he asked rhetorically: 'what does it amount to? It's not even a real state but one kept in being only by Soviet troops'. What Russia needed was a 'peaceful' Germany, he added; whether it was 'socialist' or not was 'immaterial'. By contrast, Beria's main rival, Nikita Khrushchev [9] (who eventually won the battle of succession to Stalin), refused to countenance 'handing over 18 million East Germans to American imperialism'.

A people betrayed

What of the East German people themselves? They could know none of this political manoeuvring, but they clearly regarded Stalin himself as the chief obstacle both to German unity and, perhaps even more importantly, as the real author of the economic mismanagement and repression which was damaging their lives. His death was therefore seen as a real chance to call a halt to economic and political horrors, and open the way to German unity at the same time.

The people were unable to say so, but their idea of what Germany might be was directly linked to the successes of the Federal Republic to the west. By 1953, West Germany was part of the European Coal and Steel Community [10] (precursor of the European Economic Community and, ultimately, the European Union), and keen to join a western defence alliance; meanwhile, the Wirtschaftswunder [11] or economic miracle was steadily increasing the prosperity of ordinary people.

The insurgency of ordinary East German people was met not simply with bullets but with the allegation that 'agents' from the west were responsible. This is totally implausible, not least

because none were ever arrested, let alone shot. Indeed, it is shamefully clear today that all western governments, in fear of Soviet retaliation, would not intervene to assist the East Germans.

As a result, working people of East Germany were defenceless. They had tried, vainly, to rid themselves of communism in order to halt the persistent human rights and economic abuses it had perpetrated on them. Communist policies did not work and the first to notice were those most affected by them. Yet the Soviet politburo [12] followed Khrushchev's line rather than that of Beria (a monster of another sort) and Russian tanks opened fire on unarmed civilians, suppressing the revolt within a few days. The East German dissidents were alone – and stayed that way for decades.

The East German revolt of June 1953 was the first uprising by working people against communism since the very early days of the system, and it opened a period which witnessed other mass protests in Poznan, Budapest [13], Prague [14], and elsewhere. It says much about the East German regime and the courage of ordinary East Germans. But it also speaks volumes about the west's failure [15] – until the 1980s – to understand the reality of communism, and to have the courage to respond to it with the vigorous counter-policies that eventually led to its downfall.

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