

# What happened on 17 June 1953 in the GDR?

A dossier to mark the 70th anniversary

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## Introduction

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the events surrounding 17 June 1953 in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, commonly referred to as “East Germany”). To this day, the anniversary attracts considerable media attention in Germany. The events of June 1953 are widely described as a “popular uprising” (*Volksaufstand*) that was directed against the repressive socialist regime but brutally suppressed by Soviet tanks. This characterisation roughly corresponds to that which the Western media was propagating at the time of the events. In the GDR itself, officials described the events as an “attempted fascist coup”. In public and in academic circles today, there is little, if any, space to discuss the events of 17 June and their historical context outside of the dominant narrative of a “popular uprising”. With this dossier of translated article excerpts, we want to shed light on significant aspects of the events and make them accessible to an international audience.

What exactly happened in 1953? On 16 June, there were sporadic, spontaneous protests in the GDR, particularly at one of the country's largest construction sites in what was then Berlin's “Stalinallee” (today Karl Marx Allee). On 17 June, strikes and demonstrations took place in 373 different locations in the country. Approximately 600,000 people participated on that day, with just under 5 percent of the GDR's working class taking part in the protests.<sup>1</sup> In some of these locations, the protests turned violent. There were arsons, attacks on the People's Police (*Volkspolizei*), and even lynchings. At noon on 17 June, the Soviet Control Commission, in agreement with the GDR's government and in accordance with the occupation regulations (negotiated following the Second World War), declared a state of emergency. The Soviet forces subsequently made sure their presence was felt throughout the country, especially by deploying tanks. The protests thereafter came to a swift end. On 25 June 1953, the GDR government spoke of 19 dead demonstrators and 126 injured.<sup>2</sup> A 2004 study by the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (Federal Agency for Civic Education) counted 55 fatalities during the June events.<sup>3</sup>

The primary cause of discontent among the GDR population was above all the administrative decision to raise work norms (that is, the standard measure of how much work was to be performed in a given period of time) by 10 percent, meaning that workers now had to produce more for the same wage. Austerity measures in the social sphere (such as the cutting of food ration cards for certain classes) caused additional ire. Most of these measures – but not the 10 percent increase in work norms – were already withdrawn by the SED by the beginning of June (the reasons for these policies and their reversal are explored in the following articles). The unrest around 17 June 1953 occurred only eight years after the defeat of Hitler. The German population had not managed to liberate itself and had to be liberated by the Allied forces. The number of resistance fighters and anti-fascists was relatively small. Anti-communism, a central ideological pillar of Nazism, was still widespread among the German population in both the West and the East.

The leading political circles in West Germany and the United States [had actively fought the socialist camp after the end of the Second World War](#) and had worked towards creating a political crisis, especially in the Soviet occupied zone in Germany, with economic blockades, acts of sabotage, and subversive measures. Amongst leading politicians in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, commonly referred to as “West Germany”), there was open talk of a “Day X”, when the GDR would be reconquered, including by military means. As the then “Federal Minister of All-German Affairs”, Jakob Kaiser, said on 24 March 1952: “It is quite within the realm of possibility that Day X will come more quickly than sceptics dare to hope. It is our task to be as well prepared as possible for the problems. The joint chief of staff plan is as good as ready to go ...”<sup>4</sup> The West's hostile

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<sup>1</sup> Figures on participants quoted from Latzo: “Sieben Uhr früh am Strausberger Platz” (Seven o'clock in the morning at Strausberger Platz) (2023) and Gossweiler/Itzerott: “Die Entwicklung der SED” (The Development of the SED) (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Dr. G. Möbus: “Der Volksaufstand des 17. Juni 1953 in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone und in Ostberlin” (The Popular Uprising of 17 June 1953 in the Soviet Occupied Zone and in East Berlin), 1954.

<sup>3</sup> The numbers of victims are disputed. In addition to 34 demonstrators, there were 7 sentenced to death and 5 members of the GDR security organs killed, the study also counts detainees who committed suicide and died as a result of prison conditions. Quoted from: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Agency for Civic Education): “Die Toten des Volksaufstandes vom 17. Juni 1953” (The Deaths of the Popular Uprising on 17 June 1953), 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Stefan Heym: “Fünf Tage im Juni” (Five Days in June).

intentions for "Day X" were confirmed by Gerhard Schröder, the then Interior Minister of the FRG, who said on 13 June 1953: "The Federal Republic is Germany. All other German territory is territory seized and withheld from us, and must be reincorporated."

Thus, Western forces exploited the GDR's moment of political crisis and weakness in June 1953, mobilising groups from West Berlin and organising hostile media coverage to fuel the protests and explicitly infuse them with insurrectionary, anti-communist sentiments. Just a few weeks after 17 June 1953, the day was declared a national holiday in West Germany and was marked as "German Unity Day" until 1990. The fact that a protest in another country was made into a central national holiday illustrates West Germany's hostile attitude toward the GDR and gives away the FRG's intention to lay claim to the protests. The propagandistic nature of "German Unity Day" is also made evident by the fact that it was the West who consistently rejected the USSR's proposal for a unified, democratic, and non-aligned Germany (even as late as March 1952).

It is impossible to understand the June events of 1953 without first taking the historical context into account. That includes, for example, the aggressive "rollback" strategy of the West, the disputes over the "German question" following the War, the decision to "construct the foundations of socialism" in the GDR in July 1952, the reasons for the austerity policies adopted by the GDR in early 1953, and, finally, the contradictions between the SED and the new political leadership of the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin in March 1953.

17 June 1953 represents an extremely critical phase for the socialist camp and especially for the GDR, where the endeavour to build socialism was momentarily on the brink of collapse. As a thorough examination of this historical moment reveals, the decisive factor was not so much the discontent of the population but the mistakes and weaknesses of the political leadership of the GDR and the USSR, i.e., in the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The Western camp was thereby able to find gaps in the emergent socialist world system and exploit them to the fullest. The following four texts help to trace out the context of this historical moment.

In the two excerpts from [Dr. Jörg Roesler](#), written in 2013 to mark the 60th anniversary of 17 June, the economic historian describes the aggressive policy of the USA and West Germany against the GDR and details the skilfully operated media propaganda of the Western powers.

The text by historian Kurt Gossweiler and former SED functionary Dieter Itzerott traces the historical context and consequences of the decision to "construct the foundations of socialism" in East Germany. The authors reveal the contradictory relationship between the SED and the CPSU as a driving factor of the June crisis. They develop the thesis that there were sections of the political leadership in the GDR and the Soviet Union that wanted to use the events around 17 June 1953 to overthrow Walter Ulbricht as the leader of the GDR.

The excerpt by Dr. Anton Latzo shows how energetically the political leadership of the FRG and the USA tried to intervene in the social protests of June 1953 and exploit the discontent for their own political goals.

Finally, in his letter to the West German publisher Peter Suhrkamp, the renowned playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht describes his personal impressions of the June events and confronts the narrative of a popular uprising.

## Dr. Jörg Roesler on the aggressive "rollback" strategy of the West in 1953

*Dr. Jörg Roesler (\*1940) is an economic historian who, from 1974 to 1991, was head of department at the Institute for Economic History of the Academy of Sciences of the GDR. He thereafter worked at the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam and was a visiting professor in Canada and the US, including at McGill University and Portland State University. In 2013 he published a series of articles in the newspaper jungeWelt on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of 17 June 1953. We have selected excerpts from two of the articles. In this first excerpt from an article entitled "A Change of*

*Strategy", Roesler outlines the particularly aggressive turn of Western policy shortly before the June events of 1953.*

On 20 January 1953, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, former commander-in-chief of the armies of the Western Allies in the fight against Hitler and first NATO commander-in-chief, took the presidential oath in Washington. The fact that a military man was at the head of the Western superpower was likely to increase existing fears that the Cold War could become a "hot" one. The situation between the two blocs – the "socialist camp" on the one hand and the Western European states, which had been bound to the USA since the announcement of the Marshall Plan (1948) and the founding of NATO (1949), on the other – had already been acutely tense for three quarters of a year.

Perhaps even more disturbing to the East than Eisenhower's inauguration was the appointment of John Foster Dulles as Secretary of State. The U.S. politician, who had been given special powers by Eisenhower, had developed the "rollback" strategy in his book published in 1950. According to his proposal, this was to replace the "containment" policy pursued by the previous government under the Democrat Harry S. Truman. Its goal was to end the toleration of further "communist occupations." In his book, Dulles also propagated the "rolling back" of communism in Eastern Europe. The U.S. propaganda stations "Voice of America" and "Radio Free Europe," founded in 1946 and 1950, respectively, were re-oriented accordingly. In 1953, they were joined by "Radio Liberation" (later "Radio Liberty"). These stations proclaimed day after day that the United States considered the liberation of the "countries occupied by the Soviets" as the main goal of its foreign policy.

Only three quarters of a year earlier, it had looked as if it would be possible to significantly defuse the bloc confrontation, at least in Europe. On 10 March 1952, the Soviet Union had proposed in a note to the three Western powers [the USA, UK, and France] "to consider without delay the question of a peace treaty with Germany." The Soviet government had attached to its note a draft of such a treaty, which proposed as its main point the "restoration of Germany as a unified state within the borders established by the Potsdam Conference." But it also included as the price for this a commitment by Germany "not to enter into any coalitions or military alliances directed against any state which participated with its armed forces in the (Second World) War against Germany." The Soviet proposal came as a surprise to the West and irritated Konrad Adenauer in particular, who as Chancellor [of the FRG] was fully committed to Western integration and thus to the division of Germany. "According to everything we know about Soviet policy," writes Austrian historian Horst Steininger, "Stalin's offer was genuine."

The three Western powers rejected the Soviet offer – with the full agreement of the West German chancellor. They did not allow themselves to be interrupted in their already planned integration of the Federal Republic [of Germany] into the Western military alliances. As early as 25 March, they conveyed their rejection to the Soviet side. Until September 1952, the former Allies were still engaged in a "battle of notes" over the "German question", but, at the same time, facts were being established by the West. At the end of May 1952, France, Italy, the Benelux countries and the FRG, inspired by the United States, signed the treaty on the "European Defense Community" (EDC). The EDC Treaty provided for the integration of the national armed forces of these states under a common supreme command.

For the German government under Adenauer, the rejection of the "Stalin Note" by the Western powers was the signal to press ahead with its plans for a "rollback" in Germany with greater vigor than had previously been possible - also "scientifically." As late as March 1952, the "Research Advisory Council for Questions of German Reunification" held its constituent meeting. Jakob Kaiser, the minister of "All-German Affairs" in Adenauer's first cabinet, concluded in his opening speech from the negative response of the Western powers to the Soviet peace plan for Germany: Now "Day X" – that is, the day that would trigger the FRG's annexation of the "Soviet Occupation Zone" (SOZ) – could come sooner than believed. One had to be prepared for all the problems associated with this in order to initiate the first step toward the "restoration of the conditions before the war" through reunification with the "SOZ". In doing so, as Friedrich Ernst, a member of the planning staff of the Research Advisory Council, put it, a lasting cooperation of this Advisory Council with groups such as the "Investigative Committee of Free Lawyers" and the "Combat Group Against Inhumanity" had to be established. [...]

## Dr. Kurt Gossweiler and Dieter Itzerott on the decision to construct socialism in the GDR and conflicts between the CPSU and the SED

*Dr. Kurt Gossweiler (1917–2017) was a Marxist historian who specialized on German fascism. Dieter Itzerott (1931–2020) held leading positions in the Free German Youth (FDJ) and the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). Their joint article entitled "Die Entwicklung der SED" (The Development of the SED) first appeared in the book "Unter Feuer" (Under Fire), published by the "offen-siv" journal in 2009. The excerpts selected here are taken from three different sections of the article, which primarily examine the relationship between the CPSU and the SED in the early 1950s, when the two parties agreed upon the decision to begin with the construction of socialism in the GDR.*

[...] After the founding of the GDR [in October 1949], the party - unlike in the neighboring peoples' democratic states - could not begin with the construction of socialism. There, in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria, the transition from the anti-fascist-democratic phase to socialist construction had occurred in 1948/1949. In the GDR, this was not yet possible, because - as was also expressed in the Stalin Telegram - the primary strategic goal was still the establishment of a unified democratic Germany.

But sooner or later, a definitive decision had to be made regarding the GDR's further course of development. The class character of the GDR meant that – if the objective of a unified democratic Germany could not be achieved in the foreseeable future – this could only be the same course as the fraternally allied neighbouring states in the East had taken. Since 1950, the GDR had indeed been a member of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA/ComeCon), founded in 1949.

The Western powers, for their part, did everything to deepen the division of Germany, to remilitarize West Germany and to arm it as a spearhead for aggression toward the East. As early as December 1950, the participants in the NATO Council meeting in Brussels announced their "complete agreement on the role that Germany - that is, the FRG - could assume in NATO." And in September 1951, at a conference in Washington, the U.S., UK, and France agreed on the conditions for the remilitarization of West Germany and its incorporation into NATO.

To counteract this and to support the protest of considerable sections of the West German population against the FRG's remilitarization and their demands for a peaceful unification of Germany, the government of the GDR issued a note in February 1952 urging the four great powers – the three Western powers and the USSR – to speed up the conclusion of a peace treaty with Germany. The Soviet Union was the only one of the "Big Four" to give a positive response.

On top of that: On 10 March 1952, the USSR sent a note to the Western powers with the draft of a peace treaty. This was the famous "Stalin note", about which whole libraries of articles and books have been written, speculating on the note's objectives and Stalin's intentions, with even the most nonsensical and absurd theses being put forward [...]. In this note the Soviet Union proposed to conclude a peace treaty with Germany and at the same time presented the draft of such a treaty: Germany was to be restored as a unitary state within the boundaries established by the Potsdam Agreement, allowed to possess its own armed forces necessary for defense, and to commit to not entering into any coalitions or military alliances directed against any state of the anti-Hitler coalition. [...]

On 1 April and 7 April 1952, a delegation of the SED leadership – Wilhelm Pieck, Walter Ulbricht, and Otto Grotewohl – consulted with the Soviet leadership – Stalin, Bulganin, Malenkov, and Molotov – about the next urgent steps in the GDR. Two topics were in the foreground: first, the creation of the GDR's own armed forces - which had become unavoidably necessary in view of the remilitarisation of the FRG and its imminent inclusion in NATO; second, the transition to the construction of socialism in the GDR.

Regarding Stalin's remarks on the first question during the 1 April meeting, Wilhelm Pieck noted, "Create a People's Army - without a commotion. The pacifist period is over." And on 7 April, Pieck noted of Stalin's remarks on the subject: the West "has so far rejected all proposals. ... Demarcation line [is a] dangerous

border. ... Armed forces must be created. ... Not militia, but trained army. All without a commotion, but insistently."

And on the second question, the transition to the construction of socialism, Stalin said, according to Pieck's notes, "...creation of agricultural cooperatives in the village to encircle the large farmers [*Großbauern*] ... set examples – ... Do not force anyone. Do not shout about collective farms [*Kolchosen*] – socialism. In the beginning the deed – the way to socialism – state production is socialist production."<sup>5</sup> [...]

Amongst the external factors [that contributed to these far-reaching decisions] was the FRG's stated policy objective of "reclaiming" the "Eastern zone" [of Germany] in alliance with the USA and the other NATO states. Its embargo policy and claim to be the sole representative of Germany – through the "Hallstein Doctrine", which lasted until 1973, the FRG broke off relations with any state that recognized the GDR diplomatically – was designed to isolate the GDR economically and politically while ruining it economically. [...]

In the second half of 1952, the GDR ran into economic difficulties, which resulted primarily from the fact that the country had to start building up its own armed defense forces and equipping them more rapidly than previously planned because of the accelerated remilitarisation of the FRG and its imminent inclusion in the aggressive NATO alliance system. Since neither material nor manpower nor financial resources were available for these additional tasks, considerable cuts had to be made to other parts of the economic plan, which also had to lead to serious burdens on GDR citizens and thus, of course, to discontent amongst the population. In January 1953, the Central Committee of the SED therefore addressed a letter to the government of the USSR in which the difficulties and problems of plan fulfillment were described in detail and the leadership of the USSR was asked to check whether help in solving the difficult problems was not possible.

The Soviet Control Commission [for the GDR, the Soviet's formerly occupied zone] then recommended strict cost-cutting measures in several memoranda, also in the social sphere, to the detriment of the population. The most rigorous recommendations (e.g., cancellation of fare reductions for the handicapped and severely disabled, and exclusion of the self-employed from the food ration system) were made in April 1953. One measure that met with great incomprehension and growing resistance among the working class – and on which hostile propaganda primarily pounced and thus had the strongest effect – was a decision taken by the Central Committee of the SED on 13-14 May and confirmed by the Council of Ministers on 28 May to raise work norms by 10 percent by 30 June 1953.

This decision was preceded by months of intensive information campaigns in the press and on the radio, as well as at a large number of workplace meetings throughout the country, which began in January 1953 and aimed to convince the masses of the necessity of increasing labor productivity. Although there were quite a few examples of such voluntary standard increases, they did not reach the mass scale that would have been necessary to raise labor productivity to the required degree.

So, it is by no means the case that – as can always be read today – the leadership took the path of bureaucratic administration right from the start. Only after the appeal to voluntarism had failed to produce the desired (and economically necessary) result did the management resort to the – now also wrong and disastrous – means of imposing a ten percent increase in standards "from above", without any further discussion or negotiation with the trade unions.

This created a situation that was very favorable for all forces hostile to socialism inside and outside the GDR and was also vigorously exploited by them for anti-communist, anti-government agitation and rabble-rousing.

In spring, quite unexpectedly, these forces received help.

At the beginning of June 1953, the GDR leadership was summoned to Moscow, but not for a joint consultation on the best solutions to overcome the existing difficulties, but to receive and implement the measures already decided unilaterally by the new Moscow leadership headed by Khrushchev and [Lavrentiy] Beria without any consultation with the comrades of the GDR leadership.

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<sup>5</sup> Dr Kurt Gossweiler: "Benjamin Baumgarten and the 'Stalin Note'".

The GDR delegation – Otto Grotewohl, Walter Ulbricht, and Fred Oelssner – was presented with a document entitled "Measures for the Recovery of the Political Situation in the German Democratic Republic". In it, it was claimed that "as a result of the implementation of a flawed political line" in the GDR "an extremely unsatisfactory political and economic situation had arisen." What was the "erroneous political line" supposed to have consisted of?

The Soviet document gave a completely distorted account of the situation in the GDR. It claimed that a decision had been taken at the Second Party Conference "to accelerate the construction of socialism," and that this was wrong because the domestic and foreign policy preconditions for it had been lacking.

But at the Second Party Conference it had been decided that in the GDR "the foundations of socialism" would be created; there had been no mention of an "accelerated construction of socialism".

In the "Measures for the Recovery of the Political Situation" of the new Moscow leadership, moreover, "the propaganda about the necessity of the GDR's transition to socialism" was declared false. All the austerity measures – which had previously been demanded rather than recommended by the Soviet Control Commission and subsequently adopted by the GDR government – were also declared to be wrong. They were to be withdrawn.

Particularly incomprehensible were the demands that amounted to the liquidation of the beginnings of socialist ownership in agriculture. In the GDR, "under today's conditions, only a simpler form of cooperation amongst farmers, such as cooperatives for the joint cultivation of the soil, without socializing the means of production, could be more or less viable." All cooperatives, the document said, should be reviewed and, if necessary, dissolved.

It was also extremely odd that this "recovery plan" made no mention whatsoever of the measure that had most severely strained the relations between the party and the state on the one hand and the working class on the other – the decision from mid-May to raise work norms from 1 June 1953 onwards – and did not demand its reversal. This strange document suggests that there was an interest on the part of someone in the new Soviet leadership to make the SED leadership, and especially its General Secretary, Walter Ulbricht, a scapegoat in order to unsettle his position.

The events of 16 and 17 June were the subject of two sessions of the Central Committee of the SED, the 14th Central Committee Plenum on 21 June and the 15th Plenum on 24-26 July 1953.

The course of the 15th plenum confirms the assumption that one or more members of the new CPSU leadership wanted to use the difficulties of the SED leadership in the GDR to overthrow Walter Ulbricht and replace him with a man they liked.

At this plenum there were heated arguments over the question of the causes of the unrest and attacks by some participants on Walter Ulbricht as, they claimed, the main person responsible for a "wrong policy", the result of which had been the unrest on 17 June. Wilhelm Zaisser, head of the Ministry for State Security, and Rudolf Herrstadt [chief editor of the SED's newspaper *Neues Deutschland*] came forward with this accusation. They proposed changing the party leadership; according to Zaisser's proposal, Herrstadt should replace Walter Ulbricht as First Secretary. Zaisser himself, of course, wanted to keep control of the Ministry for State Security. Herrstadt introduced a draft resolution calling for the "renewal of the Party." This resolution further stated that the Party must be the servant of the masses, not their leader. The SED should be transformed into a people's party of all classes.

The attempt failed thoroughly. On the one hand, because Herrstadt and Zaisser did not receive a majority in the Central Committee, and on the other hand, because Zaisser's protector and probably also client, his superior Soviet Minister of the Interior and State Security, Beria, was arrested in Moscow – exactly on the last day of the SED's Central Committee plenum, 26 July – and stripped of all his offices. With the rejection of the Herrstadt-Zaisser offensive and with the decisions of the SED's 15th Central Committee plenum to overcome the consequences of 17 June and to implement the measures to improve the living conditions of the population, the foundation had been laid for the consolidation of the Party and the GDR.

17 June 1953 is an event in the history of the GDR, but it is much more. It is also a part of the history of the socialist camp and, moreover, a part of the history of the international communist movement, and a very significant one at that. It is the opening link in a chain of events which, in retrospect, were links in a progressive process of decomposition and dissolution of the once firmly established and invincible socialist camp and the international communist movement.

## Dr. Jörg Roesler on the West's propaganda

*Dr. Jörg Roesler (\*1940) is an economic historian who, from 1974 to 1991, was head of department at the Institute for Economic History of the Academy of Sciences of the GDR. He thereafter worked at the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam and was a visiting professor in Canada and the US, including at McGill University and Portland State University. In 2013 he published a series of articles in the newspaper jungeWelt on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of 17 June 1953. We have selected excerpts from two of the articles. In this second excerpt from the article "Auf dem Prüfstand" (On Trial), Roesler describes exactly how the West propagandized the events of 17 June 1953.*

Barely a day had passed after the events of 17 June before both the GDR and the FRG had already adopted explanations regarding the causes and background. The interpretations of one and the same event have rarely been more contradictory. In the East, the *Neue Deutschland* [the SED's newspaper] ran the headline "Collapse of the Venture of Foreign Agents in Berlin" on 18 June. Three days later, the organ of the Central Committee of the SED enlightened the reader as to "who was behind the fascist coup attempt of 17 June".

In the West, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* already spoke on 18 June of a "people's uprising" that had taken place the day before in East Berlin. And the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* proclaimed: "The working class has risen up against the Bolshevik exploiters."  
[...]

As far as the characterization of the events of 17 June in the West is concerned, the official presentations of history – from the Federal Agency for Civic Education (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*) to the publishers of school textbooks – basically followed the language of the "Law on the Day of German Unity" enacted in August 1953. In its justification, it was stated that on 17 June 1953, "the German people in the Soviet occupation zone and East Berlin rose up against communist tyranny and (...) expressed their will for freedom." "17 June has thus become a symbol of German unity in freedom." Accordingly, 17 June henceforth was referred to as the "People's Uprising for Freedom and Unity."  
[...]

For years, the "Radio in the American Sector" (RIAS) endeavored to convey to East German workers that they would have to "toil endlessly" under the "SED regime." There was talk of a "mad work tempo" and it was suggested to the workers that they were being subjected to "the most brutal methods of exploitation" which they should resist for the sake of preserving their lives. Without the RIAS editors explicitly stating it, the radio programme the "*Werktag der Zone*" (The Working Day in the [Occupied] Zone) – which was broadcast weekdays between 5:35 and 5:45 a.m. for shift workers – naturally suggested something else: The pace of work under the liberal-democratic conditions of the FRG was more relaxed.

Since the end of 1952 and especially since the spring of 1953, the issue of work norms became the dominant topic in RIAS' *Werktag der Zone* programme. The reportage was then often repeated during early evening broadcasts of "*Berlin spricht zur Zone*" (Berlin Speaks to the [Occupied] Zone). Between 2 April and 28 May 1953, 21 broadcasts of *Werktag der Zone* revolved exclusively around the issue of work norms. [...] "Workers from all branches of industry in East Berlin demanded (today) ... emphatically that East Berliners gather at Strausberger Platz on Wednesday morning at seven o'clock for a joint demonstration." This message was broadcast at 11 p.m. and midnight on 16 June and repeated hourly between 1 a.m. and 4 a.m. on 17 June. In the early morning hours of 17 June, an appeal by the notorious "cold warrior" Ernst Scharnowski [the West Berlin chairman of the German Trade Union Confederation] to his "East Berlin colleagues" was broadcast four



times over the RIAS. He supported the demands for norm reductions. Since he had been barred from issuing a call directly to a general strike, Scharnowski explained that he could not give instructions to the people "in the East Zone and East Berlin," only good advice. Regardless, he urged the residents of the eastern part of the city not to abandon the construction workers on Stalinallee [where the unrest had first broken out]. "Therefore, join the movement of East Berlin construction, transport and railroad workers and seek out your Strausberg places everywhere." Starting at 7 a.m., RIAS reported every half hour on the demonstrations that were beginning.

## Dr. Anton Latzo on the instrumentalisation of the June unrest

*Dr. Anton Latzo studied, taught, and researched at the Institute for International Relations of the GDR, where he was last head of the Chair for History and Politics of the Socialist States of Europe. He published on questions of the foreign policy of these countries and, since the 1990s, on questions of the international struggle for peace, the foreign policy of the FRG, the history, development and politics of the states of Eastern Europe, and the international labour movement. The following is an excerpt from a series of articles by Dr. Latzo to mark the 70th anniversary of 17 June, in which he explains how the West anticipated and instrumentalised the unrest.*

[...] Egon Bahr, then editor-in-chief of the "Radio in the American Sector" (RIAS) in West Berlin, described the mobilizing and coordinating role of the station by saying, "As never before, it has been demonstrated with what frantic effectiveness and speed an electronic medium is capable of changing a situation. This has never been done before."

Because RIAS feared that "only a few people" would turn out for 17 June, they propagated – according to Bahr – their own meeting place: "Seven o'clock in the morning at Strausberger Platz." RIAS heated up the situation more and more, from hour to hour. The demands broadcast on the station became increasingly political. Soon there was no more talk of the work norms, but of overthrowing the government as well as of "free elections" and the removal of the SED from the workplace.

The protests, which were increasingly directed against the Party, the government, and the state, expanded in this way to include Berlin, the region around Halle/Saale (Leuna, Buna, Merseburg, Bitterfeld, Wolfen), the major cities of Leipzig, Dresden and Magdeburg, and the industrial sites of Brandenburg an der Havel and Hennigsdorf near Berlin. In the south of the GDR, however, such as in the districts of Karl-Marx-Stadt and Suhl, things remained relatively quiet. In Berlin and other larger GDR cities, provocateurs – most of them organized and smuggled in from West Berlin – broke into department stores, bookstores, offices of societal organizations, and state offices, demolished facilities, set fires, and tore down flags of the GDR and the labour movement. Employees of the SED, other parties, and mass organizations were beaten and abused.

The fact that these and other provocations, as well as their escalation into political actions, were planned and controlled is shown by a variety of activities of official state institutions and so-called non-governmental organizations. [...]

In mid-June 1953, the head of the CIA, Allan W. Dulles, was in West Berlin - accompanied by General Matthew B. Ridgway, who had rich experience from the war against the Korean people. With them to West Berlin came Otto Lenz, Secretary of State in the Chancellor's Office, and other West German politicians and state officials. On 17 June, the Minister for "All-German Affairs," Jakob Kaiser, also arrived in West Berlin to observe and guide the action on the spot.

## Bertolt Brecht's impression of the June events and their background

*Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) is one of the most important German poets and dramatists of the 20th century. In his letter to his West German publisher Peter Suhrkamp on 1 July 1953, he describes his impressions of the June events and their background.*

Dear Suhrkamp,

You ask me for my opinion on the events of 16 and 17 June. Was it a popular uprising, an attempt "to win freedom," as the overwhelming part of the West German press claims? Was I indifferent or even hostile to a popular uprising, did I oppose freedom, when on 17 June, in a letter to the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, of which the final sentence was published, (I) declared myself ready to participate in my own way (in artistic form) in the absolutely necessary debate between the workers and the government? – For three decades I have tried to represent the cause of the working class in my writings.

But on the night of 16 June and the morning of 17 June, I saw the workers' harrowing demonstrations turn into something very different from an attempt to win freedom for themselves. They were rightly embittered. The unfortunate and unwise measures of the government, which were intended to hastily build up heavy industry in the territory of the GDR, turned all at once peasants, craftsmen, business owners, workers, and intellectuals against them. A bad harvest last year, caused by a great drought, and the rural exodus of hundreds of thousands of peasants this year also threatened the nutrition of all strata of the population; measures such as the withdrawal of food ration cards for petty business owners called their very existence into question; other measures, such as the deduction of sick leave from recreation leave, the cancellation of special travel cost benefits for workers, and the general raising of the work norms while the cost of living remained the same or even increased, finally drove the workers – whose trade unions functioned only weakly and, according to their position, could function only weakly – into the streets and made them forget the undoubtedly great advantages which the expulsion of the Junkers [the landed nobility], the socialization of Hitler's war industry, the planning of production, and the smashing of the bourgeois monopoly of education had given them.

In the early morning hours of 17 June, the street was already grotesquely mixed with all kinds of idle youths who were smuggled in in columns through the Brandenburg Gate, across Potsdamer Platz, on the Warsaw Bridge, but also with the sharp, brutal characters of the Nazi era, the local ones, who had not been seen in crowds for years and yet who had always been there.

The slogans transformed rapidly. "Away with the government!" became "Hang them!", and the street [*Bürgersteig*, a play on words between bourgeois and street rabble] took charge. Around noon, when demonstrations in the GDR, in Leipzig, Halle, Dresden, had also turned into riots, the fire began to resume its old role. From the street *Unter den Linden*, one could see the cloud of smoke from Columbus House, lying on the sector border of Potsdamer Platz, as one once saw the cloud of smoke from the Reichstag building on a past disaster day [referring to the Reichstag fire of 1933]. Today, as then, it was not workers who had set the fire: those who build do not resort to such weapons. Then, here in Berlin as in other cities, bookstores were stormed and books thrown out and burned. The Marx and Engels volumes that went up in flames were as little anti-working-class as the red flags that were publicly torn. (In the photos published in the West German press, you can see without a magnifying glass who was tearing the flags). In the provinces, people were "liberated." But when the prisons were stormed, strange prisoners came out of these "bastilles," in Halle the former commandant of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, Erna Dorn. She gave cheering speeches in the marketplace. In some places there were attacks on Jews, not many, since there are not many Jews left. And all day long there were cheering speeches over RIAS [the Radio in the American Sector], which had scrapped its programme, and the word freedom was spoken by elegant voices. Everywhere the "forces" were at work, thinking day and night of the welfare of the workers and the "little people" and promising that high standard of living which in the end then always leads to a high standard of death. There seemed to be great people ready to lead the workers from the streets directly to the freedom for the munitions factories. For several hours, until the intervention of the occupation forces, Berlin was on the brink of a third world war.

Dear Suhrkamp, let's not fool ourselves: Not only in the West, but also here in the East of Germany, "the forces" are at work again. I watched on that tragic 17 June how the bourgeoisie [*Bürgersteig*] threw the

"Deutschlandlied" onto the street and the workers sang it down with the "Internationale". But, confused and helpless, they could not break through.

The Socialist Unity Party of Germany has made mistakes that are very serious for the socialist party and have turned workers, including old socialists, against it. I do not belong to [the Party]. But I respect many of its historical achievements, and I felt attached to it when it was attacked – not for its mistakes, but for its merits – by fascist and warmongering rabble. In the struggle against war and fascism, I stood and still stand by [the Party's] side.

*Bertolt Brecht, Berlin-Weißensee, July 1, 1953, Berliner Allee 190.*

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