‘State of emergency in East Berlin’ from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (18 June 1953)

Caption: On 18 June 1953, the Bavarian newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung describes the intervention of the Soviet armed forces the previous day to bring the workers’ riots in East Berlin under control.

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. Münchner neueste Nachrichten aus Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Sport. Hrsg. Friedmann, Werner ; Goldschagg, Edmund ; Schöningh, Dr. Franz Josef; Schwingenstein, August ; RHerausgeber Friedmann, Werner. 18.06.1953, Nr. 137; 9. Jg. München: Süddeutscher Verlag. "Ausnahmezustand in Ostberlin", p. 1; 2.

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State of emergency in East Berlin

On the second day of the popular uprising, there are serious clashes with Soviet troops and the People's Police / shots fired from tanks and sub-machine guns at the crowd of demonstrators / Soviet commander imposes a state of emergency / alleged ringleaders summarily executed by firing squad

From our Berlin office

Berlin, 17 June — East Berlin has been under martial law since 1 p.m. on Wednesday. The Soviet military commander has declared a state of emergency. A curfew has been imposed between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. The People's Police are now under the command of the Soviet Army. Soviet tanks are clearing the streets where a hundred thousand or more East Berlin workers have been demonstrating. All transport is at a standstill, and the crews have joined the general strike being staged by the workers. The staff at the water works in East Berlin have also gone on strike. Red Army troops began firing their weapons from around 12 noon. They fired sub-machine guns and carbines, sometimes directly into the crowd and sometimes into the air above their heads. An unknown number of workers have died from their injuries. Several hundred of the seriously injured have been admitted to hospitals in East and in West Berlin. The initial 'agitators' have been executed under Soviet martial law, shot by a firing squad in the courtyard of the East Berlin government building in Leipziger Straße. The strike and the street demonstrations by the workers of East Berlin have spread across the city boundary and taken hold in large state-owned factories in the Soviet Zone. About 8 000 people left their workplaces at the Leuna Works and locked the factory gates from the outside. The forced labourers from the uranium mines also left the pits and held a demonstration. In Leipzig, the workforce of several large state-owned factories took to the streets. It is not yet known whether Soviet troops have also intervened in the Soviet Zone. To date, GDR radio has simply reported the imposition of a state of emergency for the Soviet Sector of Berlin.

The dramatic events in East Berlin started in the early morning in Stalin Allee, where the construction workers went on strike, as they had done the day before, and marched in a single procession towards Alexanderplatz. On the way, they were joined by a succession of new groups of workers. The workers in all the major state-owned factories followed the strike call and took to the streets.

At around 11 o'clock, hundreds of thousands of people were blocking the streets in the city centre and pushing their way towards the government building, the former Reich Ministry of Aviation, at the corner of Leipzigerstraße and Wilhelmstraße. That was where the People's Police had already ruthlessly used their truncheons to force back the massed crowds from the Ministry building earlier in the morning. As more and more waves of demonstrators approached, however, the People's Police held their positions and allowed the workers to march past them towards Potsdamer Platz where the American, British and Soviet Sectors meet. For two hours, the demonstrators were in control of all the streets in the city centre. Their chants roared out again and again, demanding free elections, the resignation of the Grotewohl government and German unity in freedom.

Towards midday, the first Soviet tanks, armoured patrols and combat vehicles rolled into Leipziger Straße, Potsdamer Platz and Unter den Linden. They were received by booing and a hail of stones from the crowd. At about midday, the first shots were fired in front of the government building and, shortly after that, in Potsdamer Platz. Red Army soldiers first sent salvos of warning shots over the heads of the crowd; then they repeatedly fired into the demonstrators, who surged forward again and again. The wounded were left lying on the ground and were trampled by the fleeing crowd.

At 1 p.m., the giant loudspeakers and loudspeaker vans announced the imposition of a state of emergency. This Soviet order was also repeated at short intervals by Radio Berlin and was worded as follows:

'In order to restore stability and public order in the Soviet Sector of Berlin, it is hereby decreed that:

1. a state of emergency is imposed in the Soviet Sector of Berlin as from 1 p.m. on 17 June;

2. all demonstrations, assemblies, rallies and other gatherings of more than three persons in streets and squares or in public buildings are prohibited;

3. all movement of pedestrians or of motor vehicles or other vehicles is prohibited from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m.;

4. those in breach of this decree will be punished under martial law.'

From this moment on, Soviet troops went into action everywhere against the workers who were demonstrating. Tanks were used to force back the people who had to seek refuge in ruins and side streets in terror. Anyone who could possibly manage it fled across the sector boundaries into West Berlin, where huge crowds then formed. Salvos from the Red Army pursued those who fled. A Soviet tank became stuck for a few minutes after driving into the former sentry box on the pavement at Potsdamer Platz. The people fell on the T-34 immediately, grabbed an iron T-beam from the nearest ruin, rammed the tank and tried to break its tracks. Two other Russian tanks came to its aid and held off the angry crowd until their comrade was able to put the tank into reverse gear and free it. In the afternoon, a white flag was hung from the window of the police station in the Columbus Building at Potsdamer Platz. During the morning, the officers of the People's Police had thrown their weapons to the workers in the demonstration, as demanded, and had formed up to go into protective custody in West Berlin. The workers presented the weapons to the West Berlin police in triumph. Some young workers seized the red flag from the Brandenburg Gate and ripped it up.

Later on, the crowds of people that filled the entire Potsdamer Platz, seeing that larger and larger Soviet units were being moved in, began to sing 'Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles' in protest.

The police in West Berlin is now also on red alert. The approaches to Potsdamer Platz have been gradually cleared, and all passers-by have been made aware of the danger of Soviet fire. However, there have been no clashes. No member of the People's Police and no Soviet soldier breached the demarcation line.

In the late afternoon, the city centre began to empty. The entire government quarter is now surrounded by military and civilian police and hermetically sealed off.

Since all means of transport are affected by the strike, the demonstrators can return to their homes only by walking for several hours. Many of them had to stay in West Berlin, because several crossing points between sectors are blocked off from the eastern side. In the late afternoon, no one was getting through any more at the Brandenburg Gate or at Potsdamer Platz. And there are still many thousands of people in the ruins of the streets of the former Berlin City centre, who do not dare to venture out into the line of fire of the Soviets.

Grotewohl announces severe penalties

A declaration published on Wednesday by the Grotewohl Government stated that those responsible for the uprisings would be brought to account and severely punished. The 'workers and all true citizens' were called upon to seize the 'agitators' and hand them over to the organs of the state. The reason for the construction workers in Berlin to lay down tools has now been removed by the decision on the question of standards. The insurrections that had occurred were the work of 'agitators and Fascist agents of foreign powers and their accomplices from German capitalist monopolies.'

Soviet Zone radio speaks of Western agitators

Munich (SZ)

The radio stations in the Soviet Zone did not report the demonstrations and clashes, which had already begun on Tuesday morning, until Wednesday. 'Criminal elements' they said, had been sent from West Berlin into the Eastern Sector in order to stir up trouble among the workers. Large numbers of 'backward workers' had been put under the influence of alcohol by the Western agitators. However, the East Berlin workers had resumed work and were fulfilling 'their duties in a calm and disciplined manner'. On Tuesday, that is, shortly before the beginning of the demonstrations, the official Soviet publication, *Tägliche*

Rundschau (Daily Round-Up), had appeared with the headline: Closer bond between People and Government.

Commanders-in-chief discuss the situation

Bonn (SZ)

At 6 p.m. on Wednesday, the deputy commanders-in-chief of the United States, Great Britain and France met in Bad Godesberg to discuss the situation in Berlin. At 7 p.m., a Hicog special flight brought the SPD representatives Erich Ollenhauer, Carlo Schmid and Herbert Wehner, together with some party functionaries, the CDU representatives Heinrich von Brentano, Gerd Bucerius and Klaus Krone, and the FDP representatives Hans Reif and Martin Euler to Berlin.

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