

The June 17, 1953 Uprising – 50 Years Later

Symposium at the GHI, June 10, 2003. Co-sponsored by the GHI and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Conveners: Christof Mauch (GHI) and Ursula Carpenter (Konrad Adenauer Foundation). Moderator: Lily Gardner Feldman (AICGS). Panelists: Christian F. Ostermann (Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars), Robert Bowie (Head of Policy Planning, U.S. Department of State, in 1953), Martha Mautner (American Foreign Service Officer in Berlin in 1953).

Although the euphoric reunification of the two Germanys firmly cemented October 3 as the new “Day of German Unity” (*Tag der deutschen Einheit*), the previous national holiday in West Germany, June 17, remains an important date in postwar political consciousness. June 17, 2003 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the first major uprising within the communist bloc—an anniversary that has spawned a plethora of new books, exhibitions, and symposia throughout Germany despite fading memories and the loss of popular appeal. In order to commemorate this significant occasion in the United States, the Washington offices of the German Historical Institute and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation assembled a panel of experts and eyewitnesses to discuss the events and perspectives surrounding June 17, 1953.

Somewhat overshadowed internationally by the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the “Prague Spring” of 1968, and the emergence of the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1980, Cold War historians are still attempting to grasp the short and long-term ramifications of the East German insurrection of 1953. But with recently opened archives, not only from the German Democratic Republic’s ruling party, the Socialist Unity Party (SED), but also from the Soviet Union, other Eastern European states, and the United States and West Germany, scholars are gaining further insight into the causes and effects of this day. Christian Ostermann, featured panelist and editor of *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, provided a detailed chronology of the events in the GDR leading up to and following June 17, 1953 as well as a description of the American role and reactions.

Based on official documents and other archival material, Ostermann’s presentation shed light on many of the unanswered questions regarding one of the defining moments in the early years of the Cold War. The upheaval of June 17, which, as Ostermann stated, the East German leadership declared to have been “hatched by imperialistic American and West German agents,” actually had its origins months earlier. In late 1952 and early 1953, the governing regime enacted hard-line measures to increase work norms in a short-term effort to stimulate the GDR’s mori-

bund economy, ailing as a result of forced industrial and agricultural socialization and collectivization. These measures and the resultant reduced wages, in addition to declining living standards and other oppressive political and social conditions, led to unrest within the populace, compelling 130,000 citizens to flee in the first four months of 1953 alone.

In response to the mass exodus of East Germans and the concomitant economic and political instability, the Soviet Politburo expressed its "grave concern" with the policies of the SED and the situation in the GDR, and began to exert pressure on the East German leadership. This resulted, as Ostermann reported, in the proclamation on June 11 of a communiqué the SED called the "New Course," which, despite the frank acknowledgement of past mistakes and the relaxation of the forced socialization of industry and agriculture, failed to address the workers' augmented daily output quotas. The New Course led not only to widespread incredulity and confusion but also to further disappointment both within the SED and amongst the citizenry. For many, the New Course signaled the beginning of the ruling party's demise. And for the already disillusioned workers, the SED's disregard for their concerns vis-à-vis the work norms inspired many to take action.

It is commonly believed that the workers of the construction sites of the Soviet-style buildings along the *Stalinallee* initiated the strike that led to the uprising on June 17. By contrast, Ostermann claimed that it was the workers of the *Hospital Friedrichshain* who called for a general strike and various demonstrations. With news of the plans spreading by word of mouth and via the western media in West Berlin, thousands of East Germans streamed into the public squares of their cities to protest against the regime and to call for free elections. On the morning of June 17, Soviet tanks rolled into East Berlin, and the Soviet city commandant declared martial law. This led to thousands of arrests and up to 40 executions, including those of insubordinate Soviet soldiers. Although the exact number is unknown, it is believed that between 50 and 125 people were killed during the rebellion. All told, Ostermann asserted, the latest numbers confirm that over a million East Germans took part in the strikes and demonstrations in almost 700 cities from June 17-21, 1953.

Although the events of June 17 constituted a massive intelligence failure for the SED, the spontaneous and unorganized revolt also caught the Western Allies by surprise. Much has been made of the American role in the events of that day, but, as Ostermann illustrated, documents show just how unprepared the Americans were. As an American stationed in Germany at the time of the uprising, Martha Mautner provided a first-hand account of her astonishment and her experience in West Berlin during June 1953. At first, Mautner stated, the confusing and conflicting reports about what was happening in East Berlin subdued her reaction.

She said the American Foreign Service and military staff had grown accustomed to tense moments in the “crisis-prone tripwire” of Berlin. In the days following the brutal Soviet repression of the rebellion however, Mautner recalled the personal “sense of outrage” she had felt, both at the Soviets’ brutal repression of the rebellion and at the Western Allies for not doing anything about it. It was then that she finally registered the true scope and intensity of what had occurred. Despite the calls by West Berlin unions for demonstrations on the border in solidarity with the East Berlin workers, life went on as usual. In fact, on June 18 the Berlin Film Festival occurred with all the glitz and glamour that could have been expected—albeit with a minute of silence for the victims of June 17.

From the American policymaking perspective, normal life went on as well. Panelist Robert Bowie stated that in the five months the Eisenhower administration had been in office prior to the June uprising, and especially since the death of Joseph Stalin on March 5, 1953, the main foreign policy focus had been on defining a new U.S. strategy toward the Soviet Union. Eisenhower sought some level of détente in order to decrease military spending. Bowie’s insight from within the foreign policy apparatus also confirmed the non-existent American role in the June 17 insurrection. He noted the CIA’s inability at the time to grasp the severity and the magnitude of the situation in the GDR, and said that many in Washington considered the uprising to be a failed Soviet-directed attempt to force the German question back on to the international agenda. Without a pervasive revolution spreading into other areas of the Communist world such as China, Eisenhower was unwilling to intervene in order not to exacerbate the situation and to prevent the spread of false hopes of U.S. assistance. Indeed, the Americans did not view June 17, 1953 as a “great, historical event,” Bowie claimed. In fact, they saw it as a propagandistic opportunity to exploit the German-German relationship. Nonetheless, the Eisenhower administration did respond to some degree by providing large amounts of assistance in the form of an overt food program providing sustenance to millions of East Germans.

The discussion concluded with a lively session of questions and answers providing more perspectives and tales of experiences from the mixed German and American audience of about 100. For all of those present, the significance of June 17, 1953 and its continued relevance 50 years later was clear. Although replaced by October 3 as the *Tag der deutschen Einheit*, June 17, with the help of public commemorations like this one, will remain an important date in the postwar German political consciousness.

Jeffrey Luppés