

“LIKE WILDFIRE”?

The East German rising of June 1953

GARETH DALE

Before the archives of the East German state were opened in the early 1990s the rising of June 1953 had already been well documented, largely on the basis of eyewitness reports and the East German press. It was thought that up to 372,000 workers took strike action, and that many of these participated, along with several hundred thousand others, in marches, rallies, occupations and other forms of direct action. Much was known about the sequence of events, the demands voiced, and about some of the individuals involved. As the first of several mass uprisings against Stalinist regimes, but doubtless also due to the breathtaking speed with which a strike at a Berlin building site spread to other workplaces and thence to streets and public squares nationwide, it attracted a good deal of attention from historians. An abundance of books, articles and pamphlets followed.

Now, after the opening of the archives, considerably more is known, but differences in evaluation and interpretation remain. Some recent works conclude that earlier authors exaggerated the intensity and breadth of the rising. For Mark Allinson, the events represented a “relatively minor level of public disruption” in which “only a minority” took part, while others doubt whether these represented “a significant section” of the public.¹ “[T]he proportion of the population which took part in the unrest was actually very small”, Gareth Pritchard has pointed out: “Of the eighteen million inhabitants of the GDR at that time, fewer than 500,000 (3 percent) participated in strikes, and fewer still in demonstrations”.² By contrast, in 1947 “there had been strikes and violent demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people in West German cities” in protest at food shortages and the lack of progress towards denazification and nationalization.

¹ Allinson, 2000, p. 61.

² Pritchard, 2000, p. 210.

“Yet nobody”, he observes, “talks of a West German ‘people’s uprising’ against the British Military Government”.

Without denying the validity of the latter, relative, claim, this article queries its absolute antecedent. It suggests that the bulk of the literature produced since the archives opened, especially by German historians, shows that if anything it was greater in scope than hitherto thought. After examining this issue (via a brief discussion of estimates of the numbers of participants involved), a summary narrative of the rising is provided. The article then moves on to explore the question of why the protest spread “like wildfire”, paying particular attention to the transmission of “labour movement memories”.

A “MINOR DISRUPTION”?

I’ll begin with a quibble. The source of the aforementioned figure of “fewer than 500,000” strikers is Thorsten Diedrich’s *Der 17. Juni in der DDR*, which estimates that 497,000 workers struck on the 17th.³ In his breakdown of the total tally by district, however, some of the individual estimates appear questionable. For example, his figure of 25,500 strikers for Berlin is almost certainly an underestimate. The prevailing image, by contrast, is that “in Berlin, on the morning of June 17th hardly anybody started work”, and there is considerable evidence to back this up.⁴ One survey by the FDGB estimated that over 56,000 workers in the capital’s metal industries alone took action – almost three quarters of that sector’s workforce.⁵ In addition, it should be remembered, large numbers of workers struck on the 16th, including over half of Berlin’s factories, and again

³ An even lower estimate is given by Volker Koop (2003, p. 349). Koop’s calculation should not, however, be taken too seriously. His table contains important omissions (Berlin is left out altogether); underestimates – e.g. of 22 strikebound workplaces in Leipzig, as against the estimate by Heidi Roth (1999), based on more comprehensive sources, of 81; and even those strikes actually reported in the main body of his book exceed the figures in his table. These reports sit better with Koop’s conclusion (p. 21) that “more workplaces struck than hitherto believed” than with the arithmetic in his statistical appendix.

⁴ Müller-Enbergs, 1991, p. 202.

⁵ Eckelmann *et al.*, 1990, p. 156; cf. also Gill, 1989, p. 116. Another widely cited FDGB survey of sixty-six major Berlin firms with a combined workforce of 63,400 gives figures of 36,700 striking on the 17th and over 18,000 on the 18th. If these figures are accurate, then in the city where the rising began over sixty percent of the workforce in a very large sample of firms struck – and this excludes the militant construction sector that initiated the strikes. See *Berlin, 17. Juni 1953*, 1993, p. 58; Beier, 1993, pp. 116-118.

on the 18th.⁶ Diedrich estimates that 106,000 workers, plus an unknown number in Berlin, struck on the latter day, although, again, his figures for several districts seem implausibly low.⁷ It is clear from Diedrich's own figures,⁸ and we know from numerous other sources,⁹ that many strikers on the 18th had not taken action on the previous day, and to the extent that this is true these should be added to the tally for the three day period. For the GDR as a whole, if these estimates are valid, the overall figure of workers who struck between the 16th and 18th approaches (or possibly even exceeds) 550,000.

If this upward revision is in itself a quibble it does touch upon a more interesting question: if participation in Berlin was so much higher than the average for the country as a whole, was this because of a peculiar militancy in the capital? Or could it have been in part due to the fact that the strike kicked off earlier than elsewhere and was therefore able to develop for a longer period before the declaration of martial law? A reasoned case can be made for the latter. As Mark Allinson shows for Thuringia, and Heidi Roth for Karl-Marx-Stadt, many strikes could be nipped in the bud in these areas thanks to the timely response of the SED, backed by massive intervention by the police, a proto-military police force (KVP) and the Soviet army. These made large-scale arrests, especially of strike leaders, blocked factory gates, dispersed crowds and occupied urban areas.¹⁰ There is, moreover, growing evidence to indicate that solidarity with the uprising extended well beyond "actually striking factories". According to Stasi records, wide layers of the workforce showed sympathy with the strikes in countless "turbulent meetings", many of which were only dispersed by management's blandishments and threats, sometimes by military occupation.¹¹ Each new trawl through the archives brings a rich collection of incidents of "sub-strike" or strike-related activity, such as acts of sabotage, or brief work stoppages to honour the dead.¹² It therefore seems safe to conclude, in the words of one Stasi report, that "the potential

⁶ Mitter and Wollé, 1993, p. 93.

⁷ For example, he estimates that only two factories in Dresden district struck on the 18th, whereas FDGB documents cited by Heidi Roth put the figure at forty-two. Roth 1999 p. 227. In contrast to Diedrich's figure, Soviet sources at the time estimated that 219,000 struck on the 18th. Bruce, 2003, p. 219.

⁸ Compare e.g. those for Karl-Marx-Stadt, Schwerin, Neubrandenburg, Rostock.

⁹ Koop, 2003; Sascha-Kowalczyk, 2003; Roth, 1999.

¹⁰ Allinson, 2000, p. 58. In one Erfurt factory, according to documents viewed by Volker Koop (2003, p. 276) the Soviet army even placed trucks armed with machine guns before the gates of one factory in order to prevent its occupants from marching.

¹¹ Jänicke, 1964, p. 43; Roth, 1991, p. 582

¹² Koop, 2003, although based upon a narrow archival source, has produced a rich catch of such stories.

for protest and resistance was so very much greater than the numbers actually on strike would suggest".¹³ A minority of the workforce took strike action, but much larger numbers expressed sympathy.

A similar point can be made in respect of the demonstrations. Estimates of participants are commonly of the order of 10,000 on the 16th, 418,000 on the 17th, and 44,300 on the 18th.¹⁴ Again, however, these figures are likely to be slightly understated, for each new archival trawl brings more evidence of hitherto unknown demonstrations than rebuttals of previously reported ones. In some towns, such as Berlin, there was considerable overlap between the participants in these two forms of action, with many workers joining the demonstrations. But elsewhere, as in much of Saxony, martial law was declared before most strikers had the chance to march out of their workplaces.¹⁵ In this respect too, the new research confirms the contention that repression cut into a rising movement, that, given even a few additional hours of civilian rule, the movement would have spread more widely still.

On balance, the new evidence available indicates that the rising was larger than hitherto thought. It may even have reached across the country "to a far greater" extent than hitherto assumed.¹⁶ Strikes, it was already established, occurred in well over three hundred towns, but we now know that, together with marches and other "disturbances", such as school students' strikes and the storming of prisons, at least 701 cities, towns and villages were affected.¹⁷ Of recent studies, that which draws upon the largest archival base even estimates that around a million souls took part – close to ten per cent of the adult population.¹⁸

But the evidence of greater numbers involved is relatively uninteresting compared to other results of the opening of the archives: the narratives of previously hidden stories and an abundance of new detail concerning the major events. Given that most activity occurred on one day, largely in the hours between the morning shift clocking on and the imposition of martial law in the afternoon, these findings make the rapid spread and intensity of the uprising all the more remarkable. In the literature, words such as "contagion", "chain reaction", and "wildfire" crop up repeatedly. The following narrative summary provides a glimpse of this

¹³ Cited in Mitter, 1991.

¹⁴ Diedrich, 1991, p. 288.

¹⁵ Roth, 1999, p. 593.

¹⁶ Quoted in Weber, 1998, p. 153.

¹⁷ Černý, 2003, p. 2.

¹⁸ Kowalczyk, 2003.

extraordinary aspect of the revolt; in the final part of the essay an explanation is attempted.

BACKGROUND

The background determinants of the uprising are well known and shall but be briskly summarized here. One was the decision to force the pace of industrialization in the late 1940s, which imposed enormous stresses on an already weakened economy. With investment soaring and capital scarce, the SED leadership set out to raise labour productivity and suppress workers’ consumption. Even basic commodities were rationed, including linens, meat, sugar, margarine, electricity and coal. A mark of this strategy’s success is that personal consumption, according to one study, fell to forty-four percent of national income in 1952 compared to fifty-eight percent for West Germany.¹⁹ These were bitter years for workers, who suffered not only the pinch of poverty but the withdrawal of civil liberties and a lengthening of the working week.

Despite the costs for workers and peasants, investment and output grew apace. But the drive to industrialize combined with ongoing hefty reparations to the USSR to overburden the economy. Accelerated militarization, meanwhile, added 2 billion Marks to the normal military budget, representing some ten percent of state revenues.²⁰ In 1952 shortages of raw materials, labour, and plant proliferated. With farmers fleeing the threat of forced collectivization, agricultural production slumped, exacerbating the already endemic food shortages and bringing crisis onto the shelves of retail outlets and kitchen tables. In the autumn of 1952 food riots occurred in several cities.²¹

With austerity measures already in place, the ruling group sought to tackle the crisis essentially through a *Flucht nach vorn* - by ratcheting up the rate of exploitation several more stops. A furious campaign for the “voluntary” raising of work quotas was begun in March, supervised by the state-run “trade unions” (FDGB). When such voluntary methods met with an unfavourable response, a last resort was found, in May, with a decreed quota hike of fully ten percent. Over the course of subsequent weeks workers found their pay packets slashed, in some cases by twenty-five percent or more.²² Given concurrent price and tax rises, real wages

¹⁹ Hübner, 1995, p. 148. Absolute per capita consumption at the time was roughly half that of the FRG.

²⁰ Loth, 1998, p. 148.

²¹ Ross, 2000, p. 56.

²² Mitter/Wolle, 1993 p. 88

for many fell by a third within the space of a month or two; a rash of small strikes broke out across the country.²³

If this onslaught had been implemented by a cohesive state corps and with unwavering determination the grumblings and strikes might conceivably have been contained. Instead, a major split opened between Berlin and Moscow and within the SED leadership itself. Divisions over crisis management in the GDR intersected with tensions between the two regimes over reparations and over the country's very future existence. In May the new Russian leadership, concerned for the stability of its front-line ally, concluded that the previous year's "accelerated construction of socialism" had been premature.²⁴ In early June East Berlin was advised to reduce the tempo of industrialization and agricultural collectivization. A package of reforms (the "New Course") was duly announced, on 9th June, in a communiqué that publicly acknowledged that the previous year's decision to "construct socialism" had been a major mistake. Policies were now reversed or altered, almost across the board: price rises were revoked, and concessions granted to farmers and small businesses, students and Christians, and "economic criminals". The overturning of the former draconian tactic was not, however, complete: the decreed rise in quotas was retained.

Against the backdrop of a dramatic U-turn by government, mixed messages emanating from its offices, and confusion reigning in the corridors of power, an atmosphere of expectation hung over East Germany. Official "reports on the mood of the population", as Mary Fulbrook has described, indicate that the announcement of the New Course led to "widespread heightened expectations of major changes ahead: there was a mood of excitement, apprehension, anticipation, in the days preceding the uprising itself".²⁵ For the politicized discontent of the masses to translate into nationwide collective action, little was needed other than a collective public act of resistance and the means to spread the word.

FROM STRIKERS TO REBELS

That focal point was provided by a strike by building workers on and around Berlin's Stalinallee – a monumental construction site where an avenue of pomp was rising from the ruins, the regime's panegyric to itself. Workers there were

²³ Ross, 2000, p. 55.

²⁴ Spittmann/Helwig, 1991.

²⁵ Fulbrook, 1995, p. 182.

strongly positioned. Not only was the Stalinallee a prestige project; there was a shortfall of some 40,000 building workers, and many could find work in West Berlin. The strike, although in a sense “spontaneous”, developed from discussions over a number of days. Several of the leading agitators were shop stewards; one “team leader”, the SED later alleged, had been systematically recruiting oppositional workers into his team.²⁶ Beginning as a sit-down strike, the workers downed tools and discussed how to take their action forward. Should their resolution contain a demand for the repeal of the recent quota rise as well as criticisms of the government? Many thought so, but on-site FDGB officials argued successfully that the latter be deleted. Should a delegation take the resolution directly to the FDGB and government? Most thought they should, but for fear of reprisals it was decided not to send a delegation but to march *en bloc*.

The march, on the 16th, began as a trickle and without grand intentions. The strikers’ banner simply read “We demand a quota reduction!” The aim was simply to deliver the resolution. But *en route* something changed. As they passed other sites the marchers brought out their colleagues. Thousands of others – including refuse collectors, tax collectors, and the passengers and drivers of passing trams – swelled the ranks.²⁷ Even some policemen – their uniforms swapped for working clothes – joined the march. These changes were reflected in the chants intoned. No longer was the quota rise at the centre; the streets now rang to “Workers Join Us; Unity is Strength!”, “We Want Free Elections!” and, above all, “*Wir wollen freie Menschen sein und keine Sklaven!*” (We want to be free human beings not slaves). Observers were struck by the atmosphere of the march. It had “an inner, natural discipline”, according to Heinz Brandt, in contrast to “the dull, apathetic orderliness of the usual compulsory demonstration”.²⁸

Arriving at the House of Ministries a crowd of some 10,000 formed. An elderly building worker improvised as chair of the gathering and instigated a chant of “We want to talk to the government!”²⁹ Above all the appearance of the SED leaders Walter Ulbricht and Otto Grotewohl was demanded. But instead, only lesser officials emerged from the barricaded building to address the crowd. These all announced that the workers’ main demand, the revocation of the quota hike, would be conceded. An easy victory had, it seemed, been won.

With Ulbricht and Grotewohl nowhere to be seen, some began to disperse, perhaps content that a major concession had been granted so swiftly. But most

²⁶ *Kronberger Bogendruck*, Nr.3/1993, p. 4.

²⁷ Beier, 1993, p. 58.

²⁸ Brandt, 1970, p. 207.

²⁹ Havemann, 1973, p. 95.

determined to patiently wait - officials who promised concessions were simply not trusted, and were told “We want to hear that from the government, from Walter Ulbricht himself”. Reports of the gathering paint a picture of deep alienation of workers present from “their” government. One, for example, described their reception of the SED intellectual Robert Havemann: “He spoke Party-Chinese. We didn’t trust him”.³⁰ Even Fritz Selbmann, a former miner turned minister, received similar treatment. Stepping onto the improvised podium he pleaded to the crowd “I am a worker too”, but barely had he begun to speak when a building worker stepped up and shoved him aside with the words, “You’re no worker. Your stories don’t interest us”.³¹ In this way, functionaries were obliged to yield to speakers from the floor. One, an elderly man, presented a set of demands:

Cancel the quota rises; reduce prices in the state-owned shops; a general rise in workers’ living standards; give up the attempt to create an army; free elections in Germany.³²

“This is a people’s uprising!” announced another:

It isn’t about quotas and prices any longer. It’s about more than that. We haven’t just come from the Stalinallee, we’ve come from the whole of Berlin. We want freedom. The government must draw conclusions from its mistakes. A reversal of the quota rise is not enough. The government must resign. We demand free elections!³³

Further contributions followed. One suggestion in particular, by a young engineer, that they march through the city calling for a general strike, was greeted with a “hurricane of approval”, and was then acted upon.³⁴

At this point an event occurred which sharply accelerated the dynamic of protest. The demonstrators came across government vehicles which, equipped with loudspeakers, were confirming the repeal of the quota rise and insisting that demonstrators return to work. One of these was flipped over while the other was hijacked and its occupants (except the driver) turfed out.³⁵ Occupying the vehicle, strikers proceeded to use it to disseminate their alternative message through the

³⁰ Leithäuser, 1953, p. 606.

³¹ Beier, 1993, p. 61; *Berlin, 17. Juni 1953*, p. 52.

³² According to a *Pravda* reporter (in Beier, 1993, p. 163),

³³ Sarel, 1975, p.140.

³⁴ Joachim Leithäuser, 1953, p. 607; Fritz Schenk, in Spittman/Fricke, 1982, p. 159; Sarel, 1975, p. 140; Hagen, 1992; p. 44.

³⁵ Beier, 1993, p. 62.

streets of East Berlin. One building worker, Alfred Brun, repeatedly broadcast a call for general strike, inviting Berliners to gather at the Strausberger Platz next morning at seven.³⁶

The call for general strike was no “reflex”; its rationale was clear. As Stefan Brant summarized shortly afterwards:

The strike required a demonstration and led to revolt. The first open clash of the rebels with authority required an appeal to the solidarity of the rest of the population and this was expressed in the demand for a general strike.³⁷

This accurately captures the *instrumental* logic behind the progression from strike to rebellion. But each stage of escalation, each clash with the authorities, also prompted a change in perceptions on the part of strikers. Consider for example the recollection of Werner Hoffmann, one of those who hijacked a loudspeaker car. “We felt such a wonderful feeling of strength”, he recalls, “because we had dared to act like this in the face of *that* regime”.³⁸ Through activities of this sort feelings of uncertainty gave way to a sense of strength, limited goals gave way to more adventurous ones, and petitioning the government turned into confrontation with the regime. Strikers became rebels.

WORD SPREADS

By afternoon protest was branching out in all directions. Strikers spread the word - in buses and trams, on bicycles, by telephone - to workplaces throughout the city. Other marches formed. Overnight, the news travelled nationwide, through radio broadcasts from West Germany and West Berlin, and by those with access to vehicles (truck drivers, building workers) or company telephone networks (notably rail workers).³⁹ The biggest factory in Dresden learned of the Berlin strike thanks

³⁶ Beier, 1993, p. 62. Although recent interviews, including with Brun himself, have greatly enriched our knowledge of this event, the basic fact that it was only at this juncture that really substantial numbers of East Berliners learned of the strikers’ demands and strategy has long been known. See e.g. Baring, 1972, p. 48.

³⁷ Brant, 1955, p. 187, Brant was a pseudonym for Klaus Bölling and Klaus Harprecht.

³⁸ Beier, 1993, p. 71.

³⁹ By far the most important single carrier of the news from Berlin was the American broadcaster, RIAS. Nonetheless, its importance to the events of June 17 can be exaggerated. Indeed, it could not be received in some of the towns that witnessed the greatest upheaval, such as Görlitz and Niesky. Moreover, its editors were prevented from mentioning the general strike call.

to a group of some thirty SED members who, having visited the Stalinallee on the 16th, returned to work next morning and reported what they had seen.⁴⁰

Historians now agree that the course of events on the 17th in different towns was more heterogenous than previously thought. Nevertheless, it remains possible to sketch a typical progression. In the morning, wherever workers met – at home, while commuting or at work – the question of whether to “show solidarity with Berlin” was discussed. Some arrived at work with the clear intention of organising solidarity action and would seek out others with similar inclinations.⁴¹ Building workers were commonly among the first to take action, as were employees in the larger factories owned by the Soviet and East German states, but all sectors were affected by strike action: agricultural labourers, civil servants, taxi drivers, tax collectors and technicians.

Unanimity behind strike action was, of course, uncommon. Sometimes groups of workers stayed at their posts while colleagues struck and marched.⁴² Frequently, as in one Brandenburg steel plant, the argument that “we’re only strong if united” had to be put to persuade those who feared the consequences of getting involved.⁴³ Given that the action proceeded from the Berliners’ general strike call, the choice faced was of returning to work or escalating action. For example, in the Sachsenwerk factory in Dresden, after workers had gathered in a mass meeting some then returned to their workbenches upon hearing that the quota rise would be rescinded and a spokesperson from the government called for. But others remained in the yard, hesitant, as an isolated strike made little sense. Here, the shout of “We’re Marching!” indicated a plausible direction for further action.⁴⁴ In this case, as in so many others, the strikers then formed a march which, to the strains of the *Deutschlandlied* and the *Internationale*, wound its way past nearby factories, bringing out their workers along the way.

STRIKE COMMITTEES

Before work or during the morning break, mass meetings would be called, commonly by lower FDGB officials or even by well-known militants. After deciding whether or not to strike the next step, in many striking workplaces and in

⁴⁰ Hagen, 1992, p. 140; Roth, 1999, p. 187.

⁴¹ Diedrich, 1991, p. 69.

⁴² Ewers/Quest, 1982, p. 25.

⁴³ Diedrich, 1991, p. 99.

⁴⁴ Roth, 1999, p. 190; Hagen, 1992.

a good few non-striking plants too, was the election of *ad hoc* strike committees. Recent research by Heidi Roth suggests “that there were many more groups that acted as strike committees, supervisory bodies or workers’ delegations than has been assumed hitherto”.⁴⁵ Elected by mass meetings, the committees tended to comprise lay union officials, those who had played an influential role in standing up to management in past years, or workers whose voices had answered the claims of official spokespeople and SED “agitators” in the morning’s discussions. The make-up of the committees was commonly influenced by pre-existing personal connections that had developed within labour movement organizations such as the SPD, trade unions and VVN, or the army. “From out of personal connections of this sort”, as Manfred Hagen describes, “strike committees and delegations would form very quickly”.⁴⁶ In some workplaces, the sheer pace of events overwhelmed attempts to construct a collective decision-making process. But where functioning committees were established, a remarkable fusion of democracy and authority could be seen. As Heidi Roth observes, the committees “were very careful to stick to democratic rules. They allowed proposals to be made and voted upon, and recommended that experiences be shared with other workplaces”.⁴⁷

One of their first tasks was to take over the workplace. In hundreds of factories the strike committees took charge, frequently occupying the “Workplace Party Organization” and in some cases even disarming the company’s security force. The extent of their control varied. Some went as far as the formal “socialization” of their workplace. Thus, workers at the Zschopau motorbike plant transformed it into a cooperative, while the strike committee at Geising socialized the tin mines.⁴⁸ Elsewhere, their activity centred on negotiations with management, with committees demanding the reinstatement of sacked workers, the sacking of officials, and elections for factory SED and FDGB positions. The scope of their powers has been well summarised by Roth:

to a certain extent the strike committees temporarily became “organs of power”: they took on the coordination of enterprise activity, they drew up the catalogue of demands, they conveyed resolutions to the superordinate authorities, they led the negotiations with factory managements. They also took responsibility for maintaining peace and order in the workplaces, they protected property from damage and prevented attacks on individuals; in some cases picket lines were organized too. We have even learnt that in some workplaces the strike committees negotiated with management over which parts of the production process should be

⁴⁵ Roth, 1999, p. 597.

⁴⁶ Hagen, 1992, p. 150.

⁴⁷ Roth, 1999, p. 598.

⁴⁸ According to E.Loest, cited in Degen, 1988, p. 26.

kept going during the strike. In countless workplaces these committees coordinated the spread of the strike to neighbouring factories, as well as the marches to town centres and sometimes, even, further activities in the local region.⁴⁹

A second task for the committees, as Roth points out, was to spread the strike. As in Sachsenwerk, mentioned above, this typically occurred as marches from strikebound workplaces toured around industrial areas. In addition, strike committees in many plants took over the telephone exchange and made contact with other workplaces, or commandeered company vehicles for the purpose of picketing. In Magdeburg, a group of flying pickets had to break down the doors of the “Karl Marx” plant in order to bring out the workers inside.⁵⁰ There was even picketing across the Cold War frontline: West Berlin transport workers helped to bring out their Eastern colleagues, while delegations of Easterners crossed the border to call (in vain) for solidarity strikes.

Thirdly, the committees drew up lists of demands. There has always been some difference of emphasis on interpreting these. Of the classic accounts, Brant’s emphasized that “There was not a factory [...] in which the Government’s removal was not the cardinal demand”.⁵¹ Arnulf Baring, on the other hand, suggested that demands were initially limited to material issues; that “it was not until the workers had massed on the streets and their ranks were swollen by passers-by that they felt sufficiently elated to call for political changes”.⁵² This difference is repeated in recent accounts. Karl-Wilhelm Fricke, for example, maintains that workplace demands were largely of a social and economic nature, such as “Down with the Quotas”; that political demands only arose on a large scale when strikers merged with the wider public on the streets.⁵³ Others insist, by contrast, “that the workers’ primary focus was not the demand for the revocation of the 10% norm hike but instead a thoroughgoing criticism of the politics of Party and government in its entirety”.⁵⁴

There is no doubt that issues arising within workplaces did typically centre on the demand for the cancellation of the quota rise,⁵⁵ on other “material” questions,⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Roth, 1999, p. 597.

⁵⁰ Diedrich, 1991, p. 113.

⁵¹ Brant, 1955, p. 187.

⁵² Baring, 1972, p. 73.

⁵³ Fricke, 1999, p. 48.

⁵⁴ Mitter/Wolle, 1993, p. 71. See also Hagen, 1992, p. 60.

⁵⁵ And not simply for the repeal of the decree of 14 May but also for the retraction of many of the “voluntary” quota rises pushed through by FDGB since March. In Leuna the demand was for a return to pre-1951 quotas; in Buna and Wolfen, for the abolition of quotas altogether. Roesler, 2003, pp. 24-5.

as well as on the defence of the strike itself – notably that strike days be paid and that no reprisals against members of the strike committees occur. In some workplaces demands included the reinstatement of sacked workers, equal pay for women, the abolition or restriction of “scientific” quota-allocating, and even that the *Leistungslohn* (performance-related pay) be replaced with hourly pay rates.⁵⁷

However, there is considerable evidence to suggest that, although FDGB officials commonly sought to restrict demands to “material” issues, in fact “political” issues were raised in most workplaces very early on. In its very nature the strike was a rebellion, and the call for the resignation of the regime came readily. In any political system a general strike amounts to a gauntlet thrown not only to factory and company managements but to government itself. In a highly centralized system with a largely nationalized economy the connection between questions of quotas and high politics was difficult not to see. As one shipyard worker said, in response to an SED official’s admission that mistakes had been made by the government: “Yes, mistakes have been made. Now, colleagues, when we make mistakes we face the consequences. Why are these people not called to account?”⁵⁸ Strikers, moreover, drew attention to other connections between “material” and political questions – for example, between the costly build-up of the security forces and wage reductions for workers. Accordingly, lists of demands drawn up in the workplaces tended to draw upon local and national, “merely material” and overtly political issues. By way of illustration, consider the demand that police pay be reduced to an average worker’s wages, or the ubiquitous “We don’t want an army: we want butter!”⁵⁹ Other, equally ubiquitous, demands raised in the workplaces included the call for free elections (usually, for Germany as a whole), the legalization of strike action, and freedom for political prisoners. At one Magdeburg factory, to give a typical example, the list included: for the government to resign, political prisoners – including those arrested that morning – to be freed, the quota rise revoked, conditions in the factory improved, and the pay gap between technical specialists and unskilled workers to be reduced.⁶⁰ Clearly, strikers were becoming “rebels” already in the earliest stages of the rising. However, the truth contained in Baring’s words is that political generalization of this sort certainly did deepen during the next phase of the

⁵⁶ E.g. that cuts in wages, shift-work bonuses and holiday-allowances be repealed, for the eight-hour day, or for paid leave for single mothers.

⁵⁷ A further common set of demands related to the FDGB: that its higher positions (BGLs) be dissolved, that new trade union elections be held, and that the union be separated from the SED and FDGB.

⁵⁸ Roesler, 2003, p. 35.

⁵⁹ Diedrich, 1991, p.150; Hagen, 1992, p. 62.

⁶⁰ From a report by Soviet officials, 24.6.53, in Ostermann, 2001, p. 270.

rising, in the process of insurrection and the ensuing confrontations with the organs of state and imperial authority.

INSURRECTION

Returning to the narrative of the typical sequence of events, marches were formed, usually from striking factories.⁶¹ En route, other sectors of the population would join in - workers from smaller firms, housewives, school students (frequently with their teachers' support), and the self-employed. The marches were initially peaceful, relaxed and hopeful in mood. Many reports speak of the feeling of "liberation", of "being able to breathe". One Hennigsdorfer steel worker recalls the remarkable contrast between their march into Berlin and official demonstrations - "now we're not forced to go. Not like on May 1st".⁶² In Magdeburg florists recall gifting their flowers to demonstrators.⁶³ In the cities of Saxony, a "veritable carnival atmosphere" reigned.⁶⁴ Fears and anxieties evaporated, especially when the passive attitude of the security forces gave the appearance that the battle had already been won.

Upon reaching the town centre a rally would be held, or demonstrators would turn to the occupation of centres of municipal power. In Leipzig, for instance, much of the town centre - including the broadcasting system, newspaper publisher, and FDGB and FDJ ("German youth" organization) headquarters - was occupied. With the exception of a pitched battle for control of the FDJ headquarters, most of this proceeded with considerable alacrity, and already by lunchtime success was being celebrated, with protestors dancing to tunes from a piano that they set up in the market square.⁶⁵

The strike and its dissemination, the march culminating in a rally in the town center; these forms of collective action seemed as if winged by a miraculous sense of purpose. It was felt by wide layers of the population that "something should be done"; and consensus formed, often with a surprising degree of

⁶¹ Most, naturally, proceeded on foot. Some covered considerable distances and employed a variety of means of transport: a convoy of cars and lorries in Dresden; local trains for some of the Hennigsdorf steel workers (many of whom, despite the stereotype of Germans in revolutions, did not purchase tickets). Hagen, 1992, pp. 49, 142.

⁶² Leo, 1999.

⁶³ Hagen, 1992, p. 166.

⁶⁴ Roth, 1999, p. 605.

⁶⁵ Leithäuser, 1953, p.49, Roth, 1999, p. 128.

resolution, as to the course of action to be followed. As an example, consider one march at seven a.m. in Berlin. A mass of workers, men and women, some of them arm in arm, it led off and continued without pause to the House of Ministries. Now, that a demonstration *began to move* might not deserve attention, but perhaps it should.⁶⁶ For no destination had been announced in advance. On the previous day the practical intention of the building workers' marches through Berlin had been simply to deliver their petition to the government. On the 17th the purpose of marching was less clear; and yet proceed it did, indicating that marching was considered an effective means of protest, and government buildings a worthwhile objective.

But beyond the phase of the rising dominated by the strike, march and rally, the sense of clear and common purpose lessened. There were three main reasons for this. First, questions as to the appropriate course of action became more complex. As the simple tasks of winning colleagues to strike action and marching to the town centre gave way to those of more purposeful assaults, new and difficult issues would arise: What are our priorities? Which building to target? Where does power lie? Secondly, the initial forms of protest were initiated and developed by groups of workers many of whom were known to one another and who could communicate and come to binding decisions with comparative ease. As the rising spilled out onto the streets, the relative strength of such networks declined. Finally, and most importantly, although most marches and rallies had been allowed to develop peacefully, the security forces were now sent in to disperse crowds and defend centres of state power. As the Berliners reached the House of Ministries, for example, they encountered ranks of police; demonstrators pressed towards them and they, concerned to prevent an occupation, lashed out with truncheons. Generally, in this phase of the rising heavy fighting with police and KVP frequently broke out, often to the disadvantage of the security forces, which were signally unable to contain let alone suppress the rising. Often the state's forces were beaten and disarmed by protestors armed only with fists or tools. The Stasi was ineffective and its centre lost touch with many local branches. In many parts the police were weak, partly because a minority mutinied or even joined the revolt. Only the KVP posed a serious threat to the rising but even its intervention was frequently shambolic. Nonetheless, although the security forces were by no means always the winners, their intervention did raise the costs of protesting, multiplied the uncertainties facing participants, and contributed to a partial fragmentation of the sense of unity that had marked the rising's earlier stages.

A great variety of insurrectionary and riotous events occurred on the afternoon of the 17th. Town radio stations and loudspeaker systems were taken over, and

⁶⁶ As Manfred Hagen points out, 1992, p. 45.

turned to broadcasting calls to rally.⁶⁷ Over one hundred offices of state institutions (SED, FDGB, Stasi, FDJ) were ransacked; files were opened and in many cases seized or destroyed. In one town the Stasi headquarters was occupied and “the whole building was completely taken apart from top to bottom”.⁶⁸ Other popular targets were police stations and prisons, dozens of which were stormed.⁶⁹ In some towns such as Dresden, Halle, Leipzig, Görlitz there were assaults by demonstrators on main post offices (which included telecommunications centres), but these were either beaten back or serious assaults were prevented due to the presence of too many troops. “The authorities invariably secured [key institutions] from the start”, Stefan Brant observed at the time, “on the other hand, local government and party offices, even prisons, were often surrendered without a struggle”.⁷⁰

Often, however, the thrust of protest was less towards an assault on power centres and more on what Hagen calls “symbolic liberation” – notably the stripping of propaganda from walls – or attacks on representatives of the regime.⁷¹ These various acts of “symbolic liberation” could function to mobilize protest and shake the confidence of loyalist forces, but without directly affecting the sinews of state power. Thus, school children threw Russian text books out of school windows, and FDJ “agitators” were pelted with mud or thrown in rivers.⁷² The SED mayor of Thale was forced to remove his party badge.⁷³ In many towns Stasi officers and informers were captured and interrogated. Demonstrators occupied the Stasi’s Jena headquarters and took an employee into the market square for questioning by citizens gathered there. In Niesky protestors smoked Stasi officers out of their building (despite threats that live ammunition would be used), and locked them in a kennel with a bowl of dog food placed in front.⁷⁴ In Brandenburg a hated judge and public prosecutor were arrested and taken to the market square for interrogation by the citizens gathered there.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ See e.g. Hagen, 1992, p. 146.

⁶⁸ Hagen, 1992, p. 82.

⁶⁹ In all 127 buildings were stormed, including 9 prisons. Over 1,300 prisoners were freed.

⁷⁰ Brant, 1955, p. 188. “The strikers’ instinctive choice of the latter group of objectives,” he adds, “must be deplored by the cool-headed strategist as a fatal error, for the Government’s power was not anchored in the prisons”.

⁷¹ Hagen, 1992, p. 70.

⁷² *The Times*, 18.6.53.

⁷³ Brant, 1955, p. 94.

⁷⁴ Roth, 1999, pp. 297-308.

⁷⁵ They were, apparently, too badly beaten to be able to mount a defence. Brant, 1955, p. 84.

In the frenzy of these events, in the theatrical ritual of some of them, and more generally in the sense they convey of protestors “turning the world upside down”, a carnivalesque quality may be seen. This is not atypical of revolutionary situations, especially in societies in which the political views of subaltern classes are manifestly stifled, where the gap between what James C Scott calls the “public transcript” of official political life and the “hidden transcripts” circulating below decks is great – where swathes of the population hold views that they are not permitted to voice in public. Both revolt and carnival, Scott suggests, “are times of license and liberty when the hidden transcript may be disclosed, the latter with masks, the former in full view”.⁷⁶ On June 17 the “public transcripts” of ubiquitous SED propaganda were stripped from the streets and hidden ones emerged in their stead. For example, the popular nicknames for the GDR’s leaders – not previously uttered in public – now appeared on placards and in rhyming slogans: “Goatee, Specs and Stout, the people want you out!”⁷⁷ Similarly, the Berlin strikers’ “hidden” desire for quota cuts now appeared, in a literal *détournement*, as a banner slogan written on the reverse of the public transcript – propaganda material declaring that the building workers were “voluntarily” raising their quotas.

INTER-FACTORY STRIKE COMMITTEES

By and large the insurrectionary phase proceeded haphazardly, with demonstrators pursuing immediate, limited aims and with fragmented forces. However, where strike committees linked up to form inter-factory – or even regional – committees, events began to take the form of a revolutionary rising. Joint strike committees were established in Hennigsdorf, Görlitz, Cottbus, Gera, on the building sites of Rügen, and above all in the densely industrialized triangle between the rivers Saale, Mulde and Pleisse – in the towns of Leipzig, Halle, Merseburg, Bitterfeld-Wolfen and Schkeuditz. Some of these were in a position to coordinate not only strike action and demonstrations but even insurrectionary activity.

Where such bodies formed promptly they could exert a very significant influence. One example occurred in Halle district. At the Leuna chemicals plant a meeting of over 20,000 employees saw shop delegates elect a central strike committee. A

⁷⁶ Scott, 1990, p. 182.

⁷⁷ *Spitzbart, Bauch und Brille sind nicht des Volkes Wille!*

similar event was occurring in the nearby Buna factory.⁷⁸ The two sets of workers converged, joining a demonstration of around 70,000 in nearby Merseburg. “Directed from loudspeaker vans by their strike leaders”, writes Brant, the workers “ransacked Party offices, stormed the police station and broke into the prison, where they destroyed the files and released the political prisoners”.⁷⁹ At the edge of the rally a joint strike committee was established. It determined that the appropriate tactic to ensure a continuation of the rising was to return to base and occupy. While most workers then marched back to their factories, a delegation was sent to the nearest major city, Halle, where another committee was established, which included factory representatives plus a student and a tradesman. It developed an “action programme”, and set about occupying the local radio station and a nearby newspaper print shop in order to produce a leaflet.⁸⁰ Although less successful in execution than in design, this was largely due to accident; the degree of organization on display was considerable nonetheless.

A second, and more successful, example occurred in Bitterfeld-Wolfen. Here, around 30,000 workers from the major factories streamed together into the town square, where strike committees from the largest factories had organized a rally. A central committee, formed from representatives of all the major factories plus a housewife and a student, was elected. It organized units of workers to carry out the tasks necessary to wrest power from the existing authorities and transfer it to the central strike committee. These proceeded systematically to take over the town, each one backed up by hundreds of demonstrators. They took control of the prison, where an official was instructed to produce a list of political prisoners (including those convicted of “economic crimes”) for release, and even prepared discharge certificates for them.⁸¹ They also took control of the post office, town hall, SED offices, telephone exchange, and Stasi headquarters. In the name of the committee the mayor was arrested, officials taken into protective custody, police officers arrested and disarmed, and the police chief locked up.⁸² Police files were opened and the names of collaborators read out to a mass meeting. Meanwhile, the committee directed the fire brigade to cleanse the town’s walls of propaganda, and

⁷⁸ Here the strike committee, according to one member (in *Der Aufstand im Juni 1954* p.43), sat in a room plastered with SED pictures and banners; yet “there were too many important things for us to do than to rip up propaganda”.

⁷⁹ Brant, 1955, p. 99.

⁸⁰ Hagen, 1992, pp. 155-6.

⁸¹ Hagen, 1992, p. 171. As it happens, most criminals had already walked free, though some were recognized and brought back to their cells. Brant, 1955, p. 105.

⁸² Scholz *et al.*, 1954, p. 124.

ensured that food and energy supplies were in rebel hands.⁸³ In short, it usurped both economic and civic authority, in a matter of hours and with élan.

Next, it extended its influence into neighbouring areas, sending delegations of workers by train and truck to nearby towns to spread and coordinate action. "For several hours Bitterfeld was firmly in the hands of the strike committee", Hagen observes:

Here we find reports of a revolutionary nature: for half a day a perfectly structured leadership organ acted, instructed, appointed, proclaimed; all in constant (and technically almost flawless) communication with the tumultuous masses in the streets, and in contact with other sites of the uprising.⁸⁴

Finally, it sought to take the revolt forward, onto the national stage. It called for the further generalization of the strike, and sent nine demands to the "so-called German Democratic Government", which included: that it resign and, pending free elections, be replaced by "a provisional government of progressive workers"; that the army be dissolved; and that the borders to the West be razed.⁸⁵

The only town which rivalled Bitterfeld-Wolfen in the degree of organization and control attained was Görlitz. Here the enormous size of the rally thwarted the mayor's plans to effect its dispersal by police. From amongst the demonstrators a committee of popular rule and an (unarmed) "workers' militia" were formed, which "unleashed and directed a series of revolutionary activities", including the occupation of the local courts, police stations, the town hall, the offices of SED, FDJ, Stasi and the regional newspaper, and the railway station.⁸⁶ The police chief was sacked and a replacement appointed, while the mayor was forced to sign for the release of all political prisoners. Perhaps most extraordinary was the fact that the committee met simultaneously and interacted with a mass rally, enabling input from the latter into the former – "Everyone was able to put their demands" recalled one demonstrator.⁸⁷ As tape recordings of the meeting show, according to Roth, the committee members

⁸³ Hildebrandt, 1983, pp.117, 125, 131, 136; Sarel, 1975, p.146.

⁸⁴ Hagen, 1992, p. 153.

⁸⁵ Although Bitterfeld failed to create national coordination, it was not the only centre that believed this to be a possible goal. One strike committee – in distant Lauchhammer – even sent a delegation to Berlin, already on the 17th, in the conviction of finding a national strike committee already in place.

⁸⁶ Koop, 2003, p. 248; Roth, 1999, pp. 257, 598; Diedrich, p. 129.

⁸⁷ Hagen, 1992, p. 158.

obviously deliberated in the meantime, and communicated their decisions immediately to the gathering. These, in turn, contributed their wishes and also corrected or amended the suggestions of the strike committee. Despite the improvised nature of the rally, the inter-factory strike committee, together with the demonstrators, succeeded in making important decisions.⁸⁸

Two broad explanations suggest themselves for the unusual course taken by the rising in these towns. One, which applies especially to Merseburg and Bitterfeld-Wolfen, is that events were dominated by employees of large factories, facilitating communication and organization. “Where workers succeeded in keeping an overview and control over the protest marches”, as a West German government pamphlet pointed out, “everything occurred in an organized fashion”.⁸⁹ A second is that *timing* mattered, in terms of the speed with which protest events were organized and the hour of the Soviet counter-attack. Thus, in Görlitz the mass rally gathered earlier than in most towns. Unity between strikers and protestors was created quickly, goals were deliberated together, and all major centres of power were occupied within a short space of time. In addition, martial law was not declared until 17:30 - several hours later than in Berlin or Magdeburg.⁹⁰ As a result, protestors were able to take over the town. A contrast to Görlitz is given by the nearby city of Dresden. Here, a joint strike committee was initiated promptly,⁹¹ but its proponents succumbed to the delaying tactics of local apparatchiks. Eventually an “illegal strike committee” was established, consisting of delegates from five factories. But by this stage martial law had already been declared. The committee’s delegates were arrested before their first formal meeting.⁹²

AFTERMATH

The uprising burned too fiercely to be quelled at once, even by blanket repression. In the following days strike waves began in areas far from Berlin, in workplaces that had been reluctant to strike on the 17th, and sometimes in direct defiance of military occupation. All fifteen districts reported new and continuing strikes on the 18th and 19th, and in all areas rumours of an imminent general strike were rife.⁹³

⁸⁸ Roth, 1999, p. 263, 316.

⁸⁹ *Der Aufstand vom 17. Juni 1953*, 1954, p. 19.

⁹⁰ Roth, 1999, p. 604; Hagen, 1992, p. 158.

⁹¹ By Wilhelm Grothaus; more on him below.

⁹² Roth, 1999, p. 203. Stories such as this, and recent research in general, tends to disconfirm the idea, propounded notably by Baring (1972, p. 76), that the uprising was already ebbing before Soviet troops reconquered the streets.

⁹³ Mitter/Wolle, 1993, p. 106.

On the 18th, despite military rule that saw public places and workplaces occupied by Soviet troops and tanks, over 44,000 demonstrated, while all districts of the country witnessed new or continuing strikes, involving well over 100,000 workers – including many who had not struck the previous day. In defiance of the military crackdown, activists in some factories maintained their organizations and planned further activity, and industrial unrest bubbled for a further week. The 18th also saw an increased level of activity in the countryside, notably meetings, rallies, and clashes with the local authorities.

Even with the return of “normality” it was often very hard to restore workplace order. Even Soviet Army occupation of the factories was sometimes insufficient. The FDGB district leadership in Leipzig noted in late June that workers remained confident, continuing to frankly air their views, and that a common understanding of events was that “We sure showed them that they can’t just do they want with us”.⁹⁴ Poor quality work (“sabotage”) abounded, as did absences on grounds of “sickness”. In more militant plants majorities of workers had the gall to vote against official resolutions that condemned the actions, and activists, of the 17th. Senior SED functionaries toured the factories giving pep-talks, but were commonly received with disinterest. At Buna the meeting, according to the MfS, “degenerated into a rowdy provocation”.⁹⁵ When Erich Honecker visited the Karl-Marx plant in Potsdam, workers ostentatiously “fell asleep”, and when Ulbricht visited his eponymously named factory at Leuna he was met with ironic shouts of “Long live the workers’ leader!”, before the assembled workers, showing quite some mettle, set out their demands, which included: freedom of speech, freedom for political prisoners, fresh elections of FDGB officials, and the separation of the trade unions from the SED.

The post-revolt crackdown, notably the arrests of strike leaders, catalysed new strikes, petitions and go-slows to demand their release. Indeed, the first weeks of July witnessed a mini-strike wave (invariably sit-down strikes), notably in Carl-Zeiß-Jena and Buna, but also at Wolfen, Tahle, and Schwerin. In Jena, a petition calling for the release of a strike leader was signed by at least 1,300 workers. This fed into a sit-down strike of 2,000 workers on 11th July.⁹⁶ A few days later the strike in Buna lasted for several days and involved at least a third of its 16,000 workers; according to one report it exceeded “in its dimensions” that of the 17th.⁹⁷ And that was despite the fact that many of the militants who had been associated with the strike in June had fled or been arrested, and that the plant

⁹⁴ Roth, 1999, p. 418. See also Mitter/Wolle, 1993, pp. 128-130.

⁹⁵ Mitter, 1991; Ewers/Quest, 1982, p. 37.

⁹⁶ Mitter/Wolle, 1993, p. 133.

⁹⁷ Koop, 2003, p. 210.

was under permanent armed occupation by the security forces. Equally remarkable is the political nature of many of the central demands: for the release of all political prisoners, for free elections throughout Germany, the reduction of the KVP and the transformation of the FDGB into “a combat organization of all workers”.⁹⁸

THE “WILDFIRE” EFFECT

What is most astonishing about the events described in the above survey is not so much the revolutionary quality evinced by some as the speed with which the strike was spread. Insurrectionary activities, including the establishment of authoritative town and inter-factory councils, were organized within a few short hours, between the morning shift clocking on and the imposition of martial law in the afternoon. This rapidity, the assurance and discipline on display, together with the considerable congruence of the main slogans raised and songs sung, astonished observers.⁹⁹ For regime loyalists they raised suspicions that the slogans “were created in advance” or even that the rising must have been planned by the “class enemy”.¹⁰⁰ Notoriously, the public transcript of the revolt peddled by the SED in its aftermath emphasized the supposedly *planned* character of the “putsch attempt”, with “illegal counter-revolutionary groups” receiving their instructions from “radio stations and agencies” in the West. By contrast, most Western historians have emphasized the lack of planning, the *spontaneity* of events. No organization of significance had called the strikes and demonstrations. They developed as if propelled by an invisible hand; they spread “like wildfire”. The question for Western historians is that, given the lack of planning,¹⁰¹ what can possibly explain that “wildfire” quality?

One approach to the “wildfire” puzzle is to look to what social movement theorists call the “political opportunity structure” (POS). By this is meant, in Sidney Tarrow’s definition, “consistent dimensions of the political environment which either encourage or discourage people” from engaging in collective action.¹⁰² Changes to the POS may result, for example, from shifts in regime

⁹⁸ Mitter/Wolle, 1993, p. 135.

⁹⁹ By way of illustration, consider the local Soviet Military leader’s reaction: “How could such a thing happen? I don’t understand. Such things are not started up from one day to the next”. In Kopstein, 1997, p. 36.

¹⁰⁰ Roth, 1999, p. 317; Ostermann, 2001, p. 203.

¹⁰¹ And given that crowd-psychological theories of “contagion” are, rightly, discredited.

¹⁰² Tarrow, 1994, p. 18.

strategy, leadership change or divisions within elites. The emphasis in most POS-oriented studies is that collective action is more likely to break out when the regime is perceived as weak.

In the case of 1953, one can point to long-term and short-term sources of regime weakness. A strong case can be made that the post-1948 period of forced industrialization and the stalinization of party, state and society impacted negatively upon the regime's support, particularly amongst workers. In the late 1940s and early 1950s the stalinization of the SED peaked.¹⁰³ Those who had signed up out of a commitment to social justice found themselves in an awkward position. Veterans of the labour movement who had fought for workers' rights, wages and conditions in Weimar were now asked to justify the curtailment of their rights and to campaign for lower wages. Although many remained in the SED, hundreds of thousands left. As one of these, Oskar Hippe, recalls,

many older comrades turned their backs on the party, because they were not prepared to tolerate the policies of Walter Ulbricht [...] At demonstrations they would watch from the sides of the streets as bystanders.¹⁰⁴

The late 1940s saw the actual expulsion of some 200,000 former SPD members, followed, in 1950-1, by that of 150,000 deviants of various descriptions.¹⁰⁵ As a result of mass resignations and expulsions, the SED's membership plummeted – from two million in 1948 to 1.2 million in 1952.

The party's plunge was especially steep amongst manual workers, whose proportion of total membership fell from 55% in 1946 to below 41% in 1951 and 39% in December 1953.¹⁰⁶ In Gareth Pritchard's words:

¹⁰³ To an extent this was a self-reinforcing process. As Gareth Pritchard describes (2000, p. 168f), "deviant opinions and festering grievances" amongst SED members had existed from the outset, "but these had not attracted much attention, for the simple reason that nobody had been looking for them. As the regime became more vigilant, however, so the members were subjected to ever closer scrutiny, which in turn revealed all the aberrant attitudes and grievances which until then had remained hidden beneath the surface. Similarly, as the regime became more dogmatic and intolerant, so the boundaries of what became permissible became ever more narrow, which in turn meant that many SED members suddenly found themselves being denounced for expressing ideas which had previously been tolerated. Thus, the more intolerant and vigilant the regime became, the more heresy it discovered, which in turn pushed the authorities into becoming yet more narrow-minded and suspicious".

¹⁰⁴ Hippe, 1991, p. 210.

¹⁰⁵ Kowalczyk *et al.*, 1995, p. 266.

¹⁰⁶ Schroeder, 1998, p. 100.

From being a party of the industrial proletariat, it was increasingly becoming a party of managers, bureaucrats and officials, who enjoyed all kinds of perks and privileges which were unavailable to the people they were supposed to represent.¹⁰⁷

The SED's shopfloor presence in many factories was skeletal. Pritchard details the

very strong tendency throughout the later 1940s and early 1950s for SED members to become more and more passive, and for the local groups and factory cells of the SED to become increasingly inert and lifeless.¹⁰⁸

By 1953 the press could openly admit that the party had lost touch with the "broad mass of workers".¹⁰⁹

If the demoralization of the regime's supporters had been a long-run process, it was decisively accelerated in early June 1953. The New Course, a sudden, sweeping and seemingly arbitrary change of tack, generated consternation and divisions throughout the SED and state apparatuses. Functionaries who had committed themselves to implementing forced industrialization ("socialist construction") regardless of the human cost could justifiably feel aggrieved. Those who advocated a gentler "German road to socialism" or "Third Way" felt confirmed by the change of tack, many were willing to lend a sympathetic ear to popular grievances. Others were simply confused, unsure of the official "party line".

There is no doubt that the estrangement between ruling party and working class and the policy-shift in early June were contributing factors to the protests in 1953. In regard to the "New Course", the perception of division and weakness, firstly, raised the hopes of those critical of the regime that further change was possible; indeed, it was widely interpreted as signalling that the SED's time was up. Secondly, the exclusion of the quota rise from the concessions soured relations with workers in particular. Thirdly, continued mixed messages from regime spokespeople in the days preceding the rising indicated the possibility of a more doveish approach towards the implementation of quota rises, and served only to confirm that the policy was potentially open to revision. Finally and most importantly, the atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty within the apparatuses of power contributed to the extraordinary paralysis that key sections of the security forces, notably of the KVP, evinced on the 17th, and which enabled protests to spread further and faster than one would expect.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Pritchard, 2000, p. 156.

¹⁰⁸ Pritchard, 2000, p. 165.

¹⁰⁹ Spittmann/Helwig, 1991, p. 189.

¹¹⁰ On this aspect of the rising see Diedrich, 1991; also Schirdewan, 1994.

As to the longer-term issue of SED demoralization, there is abundant evidence to suggest that in workplaces where loyal SED members were present and confident, they acted as chocks that could prevent potential strikes from taking off.¹¹¹ Given, however, that "trustworthy comrades" were thinner on the ground and generally less vocal than in previous years – and in many factories ex-members outnumbered those with party cards on the shop floor – it seems reasonable to assume that this was a factor that contributed, in a permissive sense, to the strike's rapid spread.

Far from forming a phalanx opposed to the strikes, the party split from top to bottom. Although, to my knowledge, no top functionaries or factory directors took part, a sizeable minority of middle functionaries, notably FDGB officials, did so. Lower down the hierarchy, although many mobilized against strike action, most were ambivalent, and greater numbers of SED members participated than was previously thought.¹¹² Many joined the strikes and demonstrations; in the words of an SED report of June 20 they "gave in to the *provocateurs* and simply capitulated".¹¹³ Thousands tore up their party cards, joining the ranks of former members, a "very high" proportion of whom were active participants.¹¹⁴ In some plants and some towns a majority of SED members took part in demonstrations and strikes.¹¹⁵ In Leipzig fully two-thirds of SED members in strike-bound workplaces joined in.¹¹⁶ Numerous accounts of acts of opposition and resistance by SED members exist – including the fire brigade chief in one town near Brandenburg who scaled the walls to remove his party's propaganda, and the protestor who tore down the red flag at the SED headquarters in Apolda.¹¹⁷

In addition to these "conjunctural" aspects of the POS, explanation of the rising's "wildfire" spread may also be sought in the deeper structural characteristics of Soviet-type societies. One such is the politicized form of economic ownership and the centralized nature of social organization. "The fact that the state is the repository of all the means of production, is the centre of educational and cultural

¹¹¹ cf. e.g. Czerny, 1998; Roth, 1999.

¹¹² Kowalczuk *et al.* pp. 210-11. A nationwide sample of those arrested on the 17th found that one in six were either SED or FDJ members. A survey of East Germans who fled to the West in the aftermath – which is not especially reliable but probably indicative – put the figure of SED members as 17% of strike organisers. Another source estimates that SED members comprised a quarter of the strike committees. Beier, 1993, p. 19; Ewers/Quest, 1982, p. 27.

¹¹³ Cited in Fulbrook, 1995, p. 65.

¹¹⁴ Roth, 1999, p. 600.

¹¹⁵ E.g. LOWA Altenburg and Görlitz. Kowalczuk *et al.*, 1995, pp. 209, 226.

¹¹⁶ Roth, 1991, pp.577-581.

¹¹⁷ Diedrich, 1991, p.232; Allinson, 2000, p. 58.

organization”, as Tony Cliff once put it, “means that all criticism, of whatever aspect of the system, tends to concentrate towards the centre”.¹¹⁸ In such conditions local protests may rapidly become directed towards the central state authorities. This could certainly be observed on June 17. That the demands of protestors turned so swiftly to the question of who should occupy the centre of power is, to a certain extent, a reflection of the concentration of all decision-making power in central government. And because the austerity measures and attacks on wages and conditions in 1952-3 affected wide layers of the population simultaneously, a variety of social groups could readily recognize their shared plight and shared opponent. This provides at least part of the explanation as to why workers, from Rügen in the north to Görlitz in the south, came to identify so strongly and immediately “with Berlin”, and why peasants and the “technical intelligentsia”, despite specific interests that cross-cut those of the working class, so readily joined in.

A related structural feature of Soviet-type societies that may have had a bearing upon the rapidity of the diffusion of protest is the relative absence of institutions that mediate between the public (individuals and grassroots collectives) and the state. In liberal democracies a plethora of such bodies exists, including political parties, trade unions, social movement organizations, and the churches. They help to channel and give voice to grievances, shape specific interests, and mediate amongst these and between them and the state, in a process of multilateral communication and negotiation that tends to encourage the formation of differentiated interest groups and slows the formation and spread of non-institutional forms of action. In Soviet-type societies, by contrast, these institutions were, to greater or lesser degrees, intimidated, shut down, or *gleichgeschaltet*. Thus, on June 17 there were few institutions capable of playing a mediating role. The churches played no significant part. The FDGB could not respond to events in a coordinated fashion. As a national institution, its role being to support the interests of the East German state within individual firms, it was too compromised to be anything but marginal to events.¹¹⁹ The SED, as shown above, had seen its influence amongst workers drastically diminish. The elimination of intermediate strata between “state and society”, the Chinese-American sociologist Xueguang Zhou has argued, “reduces all social groups to a similar structural position” vis-à-vis the state, and thereby strengthens the tendency,

¹¹⁸ Cliff, 1964, p. 319.

¹¹⁹ Indeed, one of the main demands in workplaces on the 17th was for the FDGB to be returned to an independent, mediating role.

noted above, for "large numbers of discontented individuals in workplaces [...] to converge in the same direction – toward the state".¹²⁰

A third relevant characteristic of Soviet-type societies, related to the previous two, is the low level of tolerance evinced towards public dissent. Because thoroughly suppressed in normal times, when public protest did arise it represented more than a mere demand for policy change but was defined by the authorities, and was generally seen by participants, as a direct challenge to the system. As Sidney Tarrow puts it, "Repressive states depress collective action of a conventional and a confrontational sort, but leave themselves open to unobtrusive mobilization; a signal for solidarity that becomes a resource when opportunities arise".¹²¹ Once public protest gathers, those widely held but suppressed beliefs, the "hidden transcripts" and "grumbling" mentioned above, suddenly find themselves on the public stage. And while it is true that in all political systems private groans, when they are brought into social movements, become transmuted from an index of isolation into one of shared values and goals, in systems that suppress "hidden transcripts" more forcefully, and where the public stage is more strictly policed, this transformation tends to bring about a heightened sense of collective recognition, of solidarity. The point is well put by James Scott, who speaks of "those rare moments of political electricity when [...] the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power".¹²² An alternative metaphor that describes a similar experience is that of the "Emperor's new clothes": that a sense of liberation can result directly from the public airing of tabu themes. Something of the "political electricity" described by Scott could be witnessed on June 17. The acts of "symbolic liberation" could certainly be interpreted in this way, as could the singing of the *Deutschlandlied* or even the *Internationale*. That such acts were tabu but suddenly practicable (even enjoyable) must, surely, have been a factor contributing to the *rausch* of the June events, and perhaps also to the rapidity with which they developed.

These arguments from the structure of Soviet-type societies and from the cohesion of the ruling party form necessary elements in an explanation of the swift spread of the rising but are not sufficient. An additional factor that provides further insight into the "wildfire" effect is the participants themselves, in their capacities as deliberating *subjects*. Again and again, at all the crucial moments, particular individuals and groups initiated action, in conscious and organized fashion. These interventions were in one sense "spontaneous" (i.e. impromptu)

¹²⁰ Zhou, 1993, p.58.

¹²¹ Tarrow, 1994, p. 93

¹²² Scott, 1990, p. xiii.

reactions to a developing situation, but, equally, they were socially and politically determined, shaped by previous experience.¹²³

This “structured” nature of the spontaneous protest on June 17th can be seen, first, in the actions of those who organized protest. As mentioned above, there were many cases of strikes that were prevented thanks to the presence and arguments of SED loyalists; conversely, numerous accounts, from the pioneering studies by Brant and Joachim Leithäuser onwards, indicate that the occurrence of many others depended on the presence at workplace meetings of militants actively persuading colleagues to down tools.¹²⁴ Although the explosive spread of strike action gives the impression of a workforce, or at least a considerable layer of it, that was “instinctively” militant, these “instincts” were borne by conscious individuals who argued the case for strike action, picketing, and forming strike committees. As a rule it was groups of individuals, notably strike committees, that sought to influence events, but as Heidi Roth observes, within many such groups certain individuals existed “whose courage and initiative, political vision and astuteness” gave them particular influence.¹²⁵

Such acts of persuasion and leadership contributed to the “structuring of spontaneity” on June 17, as did the widespread receptiveness towards arguments for strike action. The key concept here is *solidarity* – with the building workers, “with Berlin”, or, simply, with the factory down the road. Most accounts give a sense of the tremendous influence of this notion. Of how waverers were persuaded to participate by the argument that “United we are strong”. Of speakers receiving loud applause when appealing to its importance.¹²⁶ Of SED members who were unable to argue against the slogan “Solidarity with the Berlin workers”.¹²⁷

In short, the “wildfire effect” was due not to some mysterious “contagious” quality of crowd behaviour but to the presence and confidence of militants and above all the receptiveness of wide layers of the workforce to arguments for collective action. The question that this, in turn, begs is: whence this receptiveness, this consciousness, this militancy? For although the concept of the strike and insurrection are familiar ones, and although the norm of solidarity tends to emerge

¹²³ Spontaneity, as Rick Fantasia observes (1988, p. 234) is itself structured, and provides the basis for organized behaviour that, in turn, gives shape to further “spontaneous” activity.

¹²⁴ Leithäuser, 1953, p.57. See also Baring, 1972, p. 68.

¹²⁵ Roth, 1999, p. 602.

¹²⁶ e.g. Bouvier, 1996, p. 323.

¹²⁷ Roth, 1999, p. 438. One of the more memorable descriptions of the power of this concept in transmitting collective action is Stefan Brant’s (1955, p. 81): “solidarity leapt from Berlin to Brandenburg and it assumed the force of law”.

in the process of collective action itself, it is hard to believe that the almost intuitive manner in which these ideas and practices were exhibited on June 17 is explicable in these terms alone. The well-defined forms of collective action on that day suggest that the performance had been preceded by at least a degree of rehearsal, that many of those who engaged in strikes and marches had either done so before or had learned of such practices not merely through history books but from relatives, through an immersion in the culture of the labour movement.

It has long been argued, by Brant, Baring and others that the heritage of the German labour movement was evident in those June days, that the "repertoire of contention" – strikes, strike committees, marches, songs – together with the coordination and commitment displayed testify to already acquired values and practical skills, to ingrained labour movement traditions that remained influential despite the *gleichschaltung* of workers' organizations. This case has been put succinctly by Klaus Ewers and Thorsten Quest:

In the disciplined and purposeful manner in which the strikes, demonstrations and factory occupations proceeded, one could perceive the traditions of collective action of the labour and trade union movements. Also, the experience of all those old workers' movement "cadre" who participated, and who were active in the strike leaderships, contributed to imparting the spontaneously erupting strikes with a certain organized solidity.¹²⁸

Detailed evidence for – or against – this thesis is not as abundant as might be hoped. No specific attempt has been made to uncover the traces of that heritage in detail. However, sufficient data exists for its validity to be established with a reasonable degree of confidence.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE (EAST) GERMAN LABOUR MOVEMENT, 1918–52

There is no need to argue the importance of the labour movement in German political life up until 1933, but a brief resumé is in order at this point in the argument:

- From the late nineteenth century the trade union and social-democratic movements were core institutions in German towns and cities.

¹²⁸ Ewers/Quest, 1982, p. 32.

- Following the schism of social democracy during the First World War they were joined by parties further to the left - USPD and later KPD – and by revolutionary shop stewards movements.
- The Weimar republic was born amidst mass strikes (involving well over a million workers), mutiny and mass desertion in the army, followed by the formation of soldiers and workers councils across the land, including the East German cities of Berlin, Leipzig, Chemnitz and Dresden.
- The following years witnessed repeated strike waves, of both union-led and wildcat varieties, armed insurrections, as well as the mass strike and uprising against the Kapp putsch in 1920.
- Although the councils' movement was tamed, and denied political power, trade unionists established influential works councils within the factories. The trade unions themselves organized wide layers of the working class, with membership of the ADGB federation alone reaching eight million in the early 1920s.
- The workers' parties too were mass organizations during the Weimar Republic. SPD membership had hovered around the million mark from 1912 onwards – the election year in which it captured three quarters of the vote in Berlin. It gained substantial votes - up to 11.5 million - in the general elections of the Weimar period. For its part, KPD membership peaked at 295,000 in 1923 and again at 360,000 in 1932, the election year in which its vote reached six million. Throughout the 1918-32 period the three main workers' parties together took between thirty-six and forty-seven percent of the vote. These figures capture something of the breadth of influence of the major workers' organizations. Many of their members were also involved with a variety of related bodies, including the factory councils but also cultural and sports organizations and militias such as the "proletarian hundreds" and the *Reichsbanner*.

Could these traditions of the Wilhelmine and Weimar periods have influenced the 1953 rising? It is easy to imagine *possible* connections. The area which became the GDR, although only a small proportion of the *Reich*, boasted a relatively high concentration of members of the SPD and KPD. In the late Weimar period it contained at least a third of KPD members (100-120,000) and an astonishing 60% of

SPD members (581,000).¹²⁹ Some of the most radical movements of the Weimar period, moreover, had occurred in this region. "The council movement in the Halle-Merseburg area", according to F. L. Carsten, "was one of the most vigorous in the whole of Germany" and developed an especially radical approach to "the issue of workers' control and participation".¹³⁰ The Leuna plant in particular was known for its militancy: in 1921, for example, it was taken over by armed workers. Halle-Merseburg was a KPD stronghold, as were, although to a lesser extent, Leipzig and Berlin. These two cities were also SPD terrain, as were other centres of the 1953 uprising including Magdeburg, Görlitz and Dresden.

It need scarcely be pointed out that the East German working class of 1953 was not that of 1932, let alone 1923. Its demographic and political make-up had altered. Many trade unionists and socialists had become demoralized during the years of dictatorship, some even joined the NSDAP. The enormous population movements, especially of the mid-1940s, took many out of the area and brought in others, in some cases "diluting" trade union strongholds with peasants from the German Far East.¹³¹ That said, of all sectors of the population, it was industrial workers in the major towns that showed the greatest immunity to Nazism.¹³² Many trade unionists and socialists were able to maintain their traditions and beliefs, at least in some form, through the Nazi era. A courageous minority, including some 150,000 Communists, took part in illegal resistance.¹³³ Wider layers avoided danger but were able to keep labour movement values and memories alive amongst groups of friends, in workplaces and on housing estates. In the working-class districts of Leipzig, for instance, there survived, in Detlev Peukert's words,

memories of the times when "our side" was strong; hopes for a society in which "everyone would be equal", as in the Russia of Communist Party propaganda (and, more importantly, as in the dreams of many Germans); speculations about the day when the violent overthrow of the regime would come; lively interest in every news

¹²⁹ Dietrich Staritz, 1995, p. 22. Given the high fluctuation, especially of the KPD membership, the number of those who had been organized socialists at some time during the Weimar republic was far higher.

¹³⁰ Carsten, 1972, p. 166.

¹³¹ To take an extreme example, in one town near Bitterfeld expellees from further east may have made up as much as 42% of the population in 1947. Cf. Helmut Smith, 1999.

¹³² Gluckstein, 1999, p. 82.

¹³³ Merson, 1985, p. 89.

broadcast about the civil war between the Spanish workers and the fascists - these features all demonstrate a certain "Communist" day-to-day consciousness.¹³⁴

These individuals, alongside other trade unionists and social democrats who had maintained labour identities and traditions, formed what Gareth Pritchard, in his outstanding study of the period, describes as an "active minority" in post-war Germany. Whereas the "passive majority" of the population experienced the sequence of Nazism, war and defeat as demoralising and depoliticising, for others, the defeat of Hitler's "Reich" bore the promise of a more equal, peaceful and participatory society. This "active minority" helped to re-establish the SPD and KPD, the combined membership of which soared to 1.3 million in the Soviet Zone of Germany (SPD = 700,000; KPD = 600,000), just before they fused to form the SED in 1946. Such individuals also threw themselves into reconstruction, notably into the organization of "antifascist committees" and works councils.

Already in 1944-5 resistance groups had mushroomed as the front approached. Although far too weak to overthrow the dictatorship, they did help to spark small-scale local uprisings that, in the power vacuum that formed as the *Wehrmacht* withdrew, developed some elements of a "liberation from below". In most and sometimes all districts of the larger towns and industrial regions "antifascist committees" (henceforth "antifas") were established, some with tens of thousands of registered members. They were in effect organs of the "active minority". Generally their main concern was to administer social order and reconstruction. They supervised rubble-clearing, the reconstruction of infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, and food distribution. They redistributed Nazis' property, sacked them from administrative positions and put them to work. To enforce these policies they formed police forces of known antifascists. As Dietrich Staritz describes, some of the antifas "exercised *de facto* state power".¹³⁵

Yet the more influential and longer lasting of the two movements was that of the works councils. This arose in response to the dislocated state of production, in both material and social forms. The owners and managers of many firms had fled. In others, workers "took a stand against the former owners and chased them out of the factories".¹³⁶ Elsewhere the uncertainties of profit in the context of political upheaval led factory owners to postpone the recommencement of production. In such cases works councils would be elected, their primary aim being to oversee both the reconstruction of plant and the production process itself. Increasingly,

¹³⁴ Peukert, 1989, p. 165.

¹³⁵ Staritz, 1985, p. 88.

¹³⁶ Staritz, 1980, p. 93.

their control extended beyond these spheres. Many established relatively complex systems of inter-factory and industry-agriculture exchange, as well as administering the remuneration of, and welfare provision for, the workforce. Where labour was scarce they organized recruitment. By late 1945 some had even become engaged in economic planning.¹³⁷ Of equal importance, they took on the role of representing workers. They resisted the introduction of piecework, and rejected management hierarchy in favour of co-determination. They were firmly rooted in the workplaces: in the annual elections to the councils participation rates were, at around 85% of the workforce, extremely high.

Both the antifa committees and the works councils were typically initiated by skilled workers with pre-1933 experience in the trade union and socialist movements. According to an FDGB report, works councillors "had invariably already held the same position before 1933".¹³⁸ A large proportion had been members of the SPD. Alongside the trade unions, whose membership grew very rapidly in the first post-war years, the councils were the key arenas in which labour movement traditions were revived. They were classrooms in the arts of industrial action.

In short, the first three post-war years witnessed a powerful revival of egalitarian values, trade-union consciousness and shopfloor power throughout the industrial areas of the Soviet Zone. In this period workers, in Gareth Pritchard's judgement, exerted "considerably more leverage over their own factories and workplaces than had ever been the case during the Wilhelmine or Weimar periods". This is a bold claim, given the labour history of pre-1933 Germany, but it is plausible and does tally with the findings of other leading researchers in the field, notably Axel Bust-Bartels and Siegfried Suckut. To illustrate the point, Pritchard quotes a visitor to the Zone in 1947 who was "told quite bluntly by the shop stewards' committees" in several factories that "nothing happens here without our consent".¹³⁹

In 1945-6, the interests of the Soviets and of the councils coincided to some degree. The latter played a crucial role in the recommencement and reorganization of production and were for the most part, as Pritchard describes, "far more favourably disposed towards the Soviets and the Communists than the owners and managers".¹⁴⁰ On the other hand they posed at least a potential challenge to the

¹³⁷ Argues Suckut, 1982, p. 335.

¹³⁸ Suckut, 1982, p. 137.

¹³⁹ Pritchard, 2000, p. 140. "I saw plenty to prove that this was not an empty claim," the visitor added.

¹⁴⁰ Pritchard, 2000, p. 43.

nomenklatura's evolving goals of industrialization and military build-up. “By 1947”, Pritchard comments, “the authorities were stressing the need for ‘productivity’ and ‘efficiency’ in terms which would not have sounded out of place on the lips of a capitalist entrepreneur”.¹⁴¹ Consequently, he concludes, they saw the councils and the trade unions, “not as an instrument of workers’ control, but as an additional means of imposing labour discipline”.

Initially the authorities had little choice but to tolerate the councils. In the long run they could rest assured that their increasing control over the national economy would undermine the councils’ influence over production. But the councils nevertheless retained a weighty influence over conditions of work and were able to effectively challenge management prerogative. To tackle this, a range of different tactics were applied by the authorities. First, council-controlled firms were designated “firms without owners”. Individual directors were appointed, management hierarchy restored, and the councils’ powers trimmed. These moves, however, were met with widespread, often successful, resistance. For example, when the ownership of a series of firms in eastern Saxony was transferred to their former owners, strikes involving tens of thousands occurred in 125 factories, forcing the decision to be overturned. Secondly, the councils were institutionalized, with councillors raised from the shop-floor and thereby transformed from workers’ direct representatives into official mediators between management and shop-floor. Troublesome representatives could be replaced by fiat; others were corrupted with packages of scarce consumer goods and other perks. This, Pritchard comments, “tended to drive a wedge between functionaries and their less privileged workmates, which is precisely what the authorities intended”. A third ploy was the gradual usurping of the councils’ tasks by the FDGB and the simultaneous transformation of the latter into a state-controlled institution. The FDGB was given the task of creating its own factory bodies (known as BGLs) to rival the councils; whereas the councils’ remit was to represent the workforce, the BGLs’ loyalty was to the Plan. Although more successful than the previous tactics, this too elicited opposition. Some workforces were able to ensure, for example, that FDGB-imposed slates for BGL elections were reopened thus enabling works councillors to be elected to the post of BGL – and these functionaries were by no means always “on message”.¹⁴² By such means, some BGLs were able to preserve elements of the works council culture.

With the *gleichschaltung* of the FDGB and, in 1948, the abolition of the councils, the way was clear for the regime to launch a battery of measures attacking workers’ pay and solidarity, and introducing taylorist measures – notably the “technical” and

¹⁴¹ Pritchard, 2000, p. 145.

¹⁴² cf. Ross, 2001, p. 47.

“scientific” assessment of quotas. “Socialist competition” was institutionalized, with those “activists”, “modernisers” and “heroes of labour”, who exceeded quotas being rewarded with prizes, bonuses and photo opportunities. The chief lever of socialist competition, however, was incomes policy, embodied above all in piece work – the implementation of which had been successfully resisted by the councils. Piece work enabled a worker to receive as much as six times the pay of a colleague on the same job; its main effect was to place a premium on sweat and undermine solidarity. Whereas wage differentials had decreased until 1948-9 they increased sharply from then on.

Despite considerable material incentives the spirit of “socialist competition” only caught on amongst some sections of the workforce. Many others engaged in what one labour historian describes as a “permanent guerrilla war against the activists”, the methods of which included stealing their tools and social ostracization.¹⁴³ Resistance was also mounted against the government’s drives to differentiate pay rates, to “taylorise” the labour process, and to cut wages through the introduction of “collective contracts”. “Passive” forms of resistance, such as “unwarranted” sick leave, and sabotage, abounded. But more active opposition also occurred – often led by shop stewards - especially to the collective contracts. This initiative provoked such uproar in union meetings (notably at Leuna), even amongst SED members, that the government was forced to retreat. Its return to the wages issue, this time with a campaign to bully workers into the “voluntary” acceptance of substantial quota rises, saw resistance flare once again. 1952 saw a marked fall in unemployment, and a rash of strikes, particularly in the building sector in which “a veritable guerrilla war was fought against the raising of quotas”.¹⁴⁴ In the spring of 1953 sporadic but significant strikes took place across the GDR. From May, as mentioned earlier, their frequency accelerated, culminating in the mass event with which this article is concerned.

1953: TRACES OF INHERITED TRADITIONS

Although the antifa and works council movements were history by 1953, and workplace resistance had become largely low-key and localized, the legacy of these movements helped to shape both the preconditions of the uprising and its course. There is some evidence to suggest that the 1945-8 period was central to the resuscitation and reinvention of labour movement norms, practices and identities that were, in turn, to make such a dramatic public appearance in June

¹⁴³ Bust-Bartels, 1980, p. 47.

¹⁴⁴ Sarel, 1975, p. 124.

1953. In these postwar years, many former works councillors were returned to their posts; a new generation learnt the arts of industrial struggle. The works councils movement in particular involved revivals of the practice of workplace co-determination and of the egalitarian ethic, and indeed of the notion that these were vital aspects of socialist transformation. By strengthening these beliefs amongst at least sections of the “active minority” whose efforts the SED was hoping to harness behind its version of “socialist construction”, the legitimisation problems faced by both FDGB and SED from the late 1940s were sharpened. To the extent that the regime succeeded in usurping the councils, the connections between FDGB officials and the shopfloor were weakened and the regime became more and more reliant on coercion.¹⁴⁵ By the same token, in so far as the posts of shop steward and BGL remained occupied by former works councillors, a body of seasoned and potentially oppositional trade unionists existed who were, according to a contemporary report, “very close to the workers and totally independent from the Party”.¹⁴⁶

There is evidence to suggest that these influences could be observed in the 1953 uprising. Most often cited is the fact that traditional labour movement songs such as *Brüder zur Sonne zur Freiheit* or the *Internationale* were sung. This has been widely commented upon; histories of the rising are littered with remarks of this kind: Leuna strikers set off, “singing the revolutionary songs of their fathers”.¹⁴⁷ Slogans have also attracted attention. Egalitarian demands abounded, calling for lower salaries for “the bosses and intelligentsia!” and for the “abolition of class distinctions within the workforce”.¹⁴⁸ The old slogan from Weimar days *Akkord ist Mord* (piecework is murder) was also audible again on June 17.¹⁴⁹ These egalitarian motifs could plausibly have reflected direct connections to pre-1933 traditions. My hunch, however, is that in most cases their immediate roots will have been in the egalitarian norms of the postwar councils movement. Can we not observe in such demands the legacy of that movement and of subsequent struggles against pay differentiation? If there is an element of speculation here, there is less doubt about the role played by shop stewards in the uprising. According to one SED report, “the mass of trade union members and of shop stewards took part in the strikes”.¹⁵⁰ Current and former trade union officials were especially evident in the strike committees, and although some incumbent shop stewards and officials may have felt obliged to support the strikes simply to

¹⁴⁵ Pritchard, 2000, p. 147; Ross, 2001, p. 49.

¹⁴⁶ Paraphrased by Hagen, 1992, p. 140.

¹⁴⁷ Brant, 1955, p. 99.

¹⁴⁸ Eckelmann *et al.*, 1990, pp. 26-7.

¹⁴⁹ Roesler, 2003, p 25.

¹⁵⁰ Ewers and Quest, 1982, p. 26; Mitter, 1991, p. 32.

retain credibility amongst the workforce, others were undoubtedly committed to the action on its own grounds.¹⁵¹ It is a testament to the importance of this element of June 17 that some participants even understood the rising as the culmination of a movement the aim of which "had primarily been to guarantee the right of the workers to co-manage in the factories".¹⁵²

Opening of the archives has tended to confirm the breadth of dissent by former social democrats in the run-up to 1953 and a vigorous reassertion of a specifically social-democrat tradition in the rising itself.¹⁵³ More is now known of individuals, such as Siegfried Berger, who had been brought up in a KPD family in the 1920s, had joined the SAJ and then, in the GDR, became an "illegal" member of the SPD.¹⁵⁴ Or of the well-known Görlitz Social Democrat Max Latt. Witnesses recall his speech at the rally there:

Friends, I'm old man Latt. Since 1904 I've been a member of the Social Democratic Party. I've taken part in three revolutions – in 1918, in 1945, and now in the revolution of 17th June 1953...¹⁵⁵

In that same town an "SPD Revolution Committee" was set up already on the 17th, and SPD "initiative committees" were formed in an optics factory and at the hospital.¹⁵⁶ Workers in Bitterfeld, Leuna, in Bernburg and elsewhere formed "SPD workers committees", and passed resolutions, painted graffiti and put up banners calling for the legalization of their party.¹⁵⁷ An analysis prepared for the SED Central Committee claimed that "former SPD members raised their heads [...] in all districts".¹⁵⁸ Even in the subsequent mini-wave of protests in July, SPD supporters were heard, such as the man who led a crowd in Dresden chanting "Long Live the SPD!"¹⁵⁹ Karl-Wilhelm Fricke may be overstating somewhat in his claim that

¹⁵¹ Kramer, 1999, p. 50; Kowalczyk *et al.*, 1995, p. 55; Roth, 1999, p. 599.

¹⁵² In Oskar Hippe's recollections from discussions with shop stewards in a Magdeburg prison. (Hippe, 1991, p. 234). This may not have been a typical experience. Magdeburg had witnessed smouldering industrial struggle for months, including a strike which, according to Volker Koop, "far exceeded the dimensions" of that on June 17. Koop, 2003, p. 175f.

¹⁵³ e.g. Czerny, 1998, p. 8. However, there were also former SPD members who put "party" before "class", or who saw the rising as reckless. There were SPD towns that barely participated in the rising. Cf. for example Franz Walter, 1993; Pritchard, 2002, p. 124.

¹⁵⁴ Bouvier, 1996.

¹⁵⁵ Brant, 1955, p. 125.

¹⁵⁶ Bruce, 2003, p. 185.

¹⁵⁷ Bruce, 2003, pp. 185-92; Diedrich, 1991, p. 127; Hagen, 1992, p. 159.

¹⁵⁸ Hagen, 1992, p. 159.

¹⁵⁹ Kowalczyk *et al.*, 1995, p. 258

social-democratic influences “fundamentally determined” the nature of the uprising, but if so, he is not so wide of the mark.¹⁶⁰

As regards KPD members from the Weimar period, it would seem unlikely that they participated in greater numbers than former social-democrats, if only for reasons of the unequal pre-war sizes of the parties. It used to be claimed, following a widely quoted survey cited by Martin Jänicke, that their rate of participation on June 17 was very high.¹⁶¹ That, of SED members purged in the aftermath, in many regions over 30% and sometimes as many as 50-70% had been members of the KPD before 1933 – far higher than statistical averages would predict. Since the opening of the archives it has become apparent that these figures are over-estimates, and that around 13% of those expelled in 1953 had been in the KPD *or* SPD before 1933, with only a few percent having been members since the 1918-23 period.¹⁶²

What the new materials do confirm is that the words of “older, experienced” workers carried weight in the strike committees. They were particularly influential in the formulating of demands, particularly those of a defensive nature – for instance, that no reprisals be taken against strikers.¹⁶³ In the committees, Heidi Roth observes, those individuals stood out who, “as a result of their experience of industrial and political struggles before 1933 and after 1945 [...] knew what to do and what to avoid”.¹⁶⁴ It was they, above all, who were prepared to “take on responsibility on the spot, take risks upon themselves and make impromptu decisions within unforeseeable scenarios”.

Something more is now known of the biographies of strike committee members. Of individuals such as:

- The Berlin building worker, about 50 years old, who made the speech (above) before the House of Ministries that provided such a clear formulation of demands. His opening words have variously been reported as: “Mates, I did five years in a concentration camp under the Nazis. But I’m not afraid of doing another ten under this lot”, and: “He had sat in concentration camp for having stood up for workers’ rights. Now he sees it as his duty to defend those

¹⁶⁰ Fricke, 1984, p. 43.

¹⁶¹ Jänicke, 1964, p. 51.

¹⁶² Bouvier, 1996, p. 311; Mitter, 1991; Mitter/Wolle, 1993, p. 135; Kowalczyk *et al.*, 1995, p. 233; Roth, 1999, pp. 176, 441.

¹⁶³ Beier, 1993, pp. 40, 61, Sarel, 1975, p. 140.

¹⁶⁴ Roth, 1999, p. 602.

rights once more",¹⁶⁵ Another report suggests that it was the very same worker who had led the arguments for strike action in the Stalinallee discussions on the 12th.¹⁶⁶

- Wilhelm Grothaus, who was the inspiration for the convening of a delegates conference in Dresden.¹⁶⁷ He first experienced strike action as a twelve year old, in 1905, joined the SPD in 1919, the KPD in 1933. He then engaged in underground antifascist work, was arrested in 1944, tortured and sentenced to death. Having escaped from prison he rejoined the KPD in 1945 but later left the SED, disillusioned. After leaving the party he "maintained contact with other disillusioned comrades in the factory, and within the (mainly Communist) 'Union of Victims of the Nazi-Regime'".¹⁶⁸
- Otto Reckstatt, a strike leader in the Abus factory, Nordhausen.¹⁶⁹ Reckstatt had been an SPD town councillor in 1933. Although expelled from the SED in 1950, he was able to retain his FDGB position.
- Walter Kellner. A trade unionist since 1921 and from a social-democrat family, he had joined the *Reichsbanner* and later the SPD. In his workplace in 1953, he recalls, "The workers didn't know how to articulate their discontent and protest". As a result of his experience as a trade unionist he felt that it was incumbent upon him "to draft a resolution and present it to the workforce".¹⁷⁰

THESES AND OBJECTIONS

A number of themes and theses were brought out in the above narrative of the uprising and in the subsequent discussions of the 1945-52 period and its influence upon June 17. Three were emphasized above all: (i) Strike action, often directed by strike committees or "delegations" of workers, formed the backbone of a movement in the workplaces which then mobilized and catalysed protest and

¹⁶⁵ Brant, p. 64; Pravda journalist, in Beier, 1993, p. 103.

¹⁶⁶ Spittmann/Fricke, 1982, p. 116.

¹⁶⁷ Roth, 1999, p. 602.

¹⁶⁸ Hagen, 1992, p. 140; Spittmann/Fricke, 1982, p. 136.

¹⁶⁹ Schmidtke, 1993, p. 280.

¹⁷⁰ Paraphrased by Bouvier, 1996, p. 314f.

insurrection amongst wider layers. (ii) Especially within the strike movement, labour traditions – notably those of the works councils and SPD – could be described. (iii) Influential contributions to the course of events were made by labour movement veterans.

Before concluding, some discussion of objections that may be levelled against these theses is called for. Point (i) is usually identified with the label “workers uprising” and has long been a staple interpretation of histories of 1953. “The rising was the achievement of the working class”, according to Brant, “the workers had drawn the rest of the people in their wake”.¹⁷¹ “It was the industrial workers – actively supported by the youth of the GDR who were responsible for the events of June 17”, Baring suggested in his account: “They started the rising and they were the dominant factor in every major demonstration”.¹⁷² To the extent that the thesis involves the claim that workers were central to events, it is uncontroversial. However, some historians see the term “workers’ uprising” as misleading. Among the recent attempts to re-interpret the rising, one of the more thought-provoking is provided by Gareth Pritchard, in his *The Making of the GDR, 1945-53*. In his assessment, Pritchard’s emphasis is upon the cleavages within East German society – between workers and the “technical intelligentsia”, workers and farmers, former Nazis and anti-Nazis. The working class itself was fragmented, he argues, notably between old socialists and the new generation “who had no memory” of the Weimar period and who, in their majority, “were not in the least bit interested in the Socialist traditions of their more elderly colleagues”.¹⁷³ Whereas older workers cultivated socialist traditions and played a key role in strike committees, youth came to the fore on demonstrations. For them,

“Socialism” was no more than a word used by party bigwigs and the Free German Youth (FDJ) to justify oppression. [...] Their rejection of the East German state was based not on principled Socialist convictions but on a less politicized discontent with the stuffy and oppressive atmosphere of East Germany in the early 1950s.

As a result of these various cleavages no significant common basis existed that could sustain any sort of movement that could be defined in the singular. The June upheaval, Pritchard concludes, was not a workers’ revolt but Bedlam - “a furious cacophony of voices which drowned each other out and prevented any clear message from emerging”.

¹⁷¹ Brant, 1995, p. 77.

¹⁷² Baring, 1972, p. 52.

¹⁷³ Pritchard, 2000, p. 215.

Before looking more closely at the substantive issues, it is worth pausing to consider that, by this measure, for a historical event to qualify as a workers’ rising four criteria would be necessary: that workers make up the bulk of the movement, that they provide political leadership, that a consensus position forms amongst the bulk of workers, young and old, and that this is brought out in the form of a “clear message”. These latter two criteria are quite stringent. Indeed, do they not rule out a “positive” identification of *all* mass movements? For no society is homogenous, and all mass movements reflect this. They encompass a variety of voices, social groups, tensions and debates. Such heterogeneity was certainly manifest on June 17, but to say this need not involve a denial that unification amongst different groups occurred over tactical and strategic issues. If a social movement does not “speak” in unison it does not necessarily mean that it appears as a “furious cacophony”, just as a painting that is no Mondrian need not therefore be a Pollock.

That qualification aside, much of the evidence that Pritchard draws upon to make his case is clearly true. For example, it has always been known that the countryside danced more to the tune of the *Deutschlandlied* and less to socialist songs than did the towns, and that friction existed between members of the “technical intelligentsia” and workers – as the slogans of some of the latter would lead one to expect, notably “Lower the salaries of the bosses and the intelligentsia!”¹⁷⁴ In addition, the new archival information demonstrates greater involvement by the “technical intelligentsia” and more activity in many rural areas than had been previously thought. A little more is also known of inter-class tensions within the movement. A good example is the case of Görlitz, in which direction of the movement, initially largely in the hands of strike committees, passed to a “town council” with a more middle-class make-up.¹⁷⁵ Friction arose – in fact a serious row broke out – when a factory worker demanded that a businessman leave the committee as he was not representing workers’ interests.¹⁷⁶

Equally, however, the new evidence shows that in rural parts the greatest degree of activity was, on the whole, in areas with concentrations of industrial workers and that many countryfolk gravitated to protests in nearby towns.¹⁷⁷ It demonstrates that where technicians did become involved they frequently collaborated with workers, and in many instances initiated strikes and participated in strike committees. It seems reasonable to conclude that, on the whole, farmers, the “technical intelligentsia” and the middle classes were drawn into a movement the bulk of which

¹⁷⁴ Diedrich, 1991, p. 150.

¹⁷⁵ Hagen, 1992, p. 160.

¹⁷⁶ Roth, 1999, p. 284.

¹⁷⁷ Fulbrook, 1995, p. 185; Kowalczyk *et al.*, 1995, p. 111; Neubert, 1998, p. 82.

was composed of, and the tone of which was largely set by, workers, their spouses and children. The working-class section of the movement did not march in step, nor did it overwhelm other groups. But in much of the country its position within the protests was hegemonic, and taken as a whole its role within the uprising was crucial.

As to the generational cleavage *within* the working class, once again, this is a distinction that makes a lot of sense. But it is somewhat overdrawn. It relies upon a contrast between older workers “who had come to Socialism as a result of their own experiences of oppression during the Weimar and Nazi periods” and younger ones, “whose formative years had been spent in the Hitler Youth”.¹⁷⁸ Now, it is doubtless true that few young people turned to socialism under Hitler.¹⁷⁹ But this distinction elides the crucial intervening years of 1945-52, a period during which many a youthful participant in the rising had become politicized. Heinrich Schlothauer, for example, joined the SPD in 1945 aged 22.¹⁸⁰ Full of enthusiasm at first, by 1952 his faith in his party, now the SED, had waned, but not his commitment to the values that he had held in 1945. Although still a party member on June 17 1953, on that day he wrote, printed and distributed leaflets that accused the government of betraying the peasantry and working class. Schlothauer may not have represented the “average” young worker but nor, I suspect, was his case exceptional.

The portrait of a stark age gap also neglects the *transmission* of “memory” – the younger workers who were aware of past labour traditions thanks to relatives, friends, or colleagues. For although it is true that only a minority of June 17 strikers had hands-on experience of the pre-1933 labour movement, many more had imbibed its heritage from older generations. We know for instance that the 29-year-old Bitterfeld strike leader Horst Sowada and the young Schmölln strike leader Heinz Neumann both hailed from SPD families.¹⁸¹ Sowada had been interrogated by the Gestapo at the tender age of fourteen.¹⁸² Neumann had joined the SPD in 1945, at the age of twenty-four. Briefly a BGL, he was expelled from the SED in 1951.¹⁸³ On June 17, after heading the march into town, he gave a short speech

¹⁷⁸ Pritchard, 2000, p. 215.

¹⁷⁹ Although some did; cf. esp. Tim Mason, 1995, p. 237.

¹⁸⁰ Schlothauer, 1995.

¹⁸¹ Hagen, 1992, p.151; Kowalczyk *et al.*, 1995, p. 256.

¹⁸² Hildebrandt, 1983, p. 118.

¹⁸³ Bouvier, 1996, p. 317.

as the rally gathered, declaring solidarity with the building workers of Berlin, and led the crowd in singing the SPD's anthem *Brüder zur Sonne zur Freiheit*.¹⁸⁴

Furthermore, the fact that there are now abundant testimonies to the role of young workers in initiating workplace meetings and strike action,¹⁸⁵ as well as evidence of research conducted by the SED's Central Committee that found young workers to have participated in all strike-bound workplaces,¹⁸⁶ suggests that at least some transmission of labour traditions occurred in the process of collective action itself.¹⁸⁷ A glimpse of this possibility is given in the recollection of Alfred Brun, then a young Berlin builder, that it was "an older colleague, who probably had more experience" of strike action who suggested that the building workers should raise the demand that no striker be punished. His younger colleagues took the advice gladly.¹⁸⁸ Were younger workers blind to the trade union (or socialist) backgrounds of their older colleagues? If not, it may be as plausible to surmise that youth learnt from experience in the 1945-53 period, and especially during the rising itself, as that the relationship was one of generational "cleavage".

The high-contrast image of the generations would be accurate if workers were *either* socialists, conscious of their class interests, *or* simply individuals, their class membership bearing no relation to their social identity or *Weltanschauung*. However, if "class consciousness" is divided not into "socialist" or "none" but, following Satnam Virdee, also includes "sectional" and "corporate", then shades of grey enter the picture. In Virdee's schema, where workers' identities develop around markers of difference, such as occupation, rather than unity (class position), "sectional consciousness" is likely to predominate: the worker "identifies himself and his interests primarily with a section of his class with whom he has an immediate interest (e.g. colleagues at work)". Virdee distinguishes this both from "corporate" class consciousness, where "a worker identifies himself and his interests with the corporate body and the interests of the working class as a whole", and from "hegemonic" class consciousness, where "a worker identifies the revolutionary interests of the working class with the interests of society as a whole". If the issue is cast in these terms, it is difficult not to believe that many young participants were class conscious in a corporate sense. There is certainly evidence for this, including numerous references to young workers not only involving themselves in strike committees but supporting the call

¹⁸⁴ Dürr, 1993, p. 456f.

¹⁸⁵ e.g. Roth, 1999, pp. 253, 590f.

¹⁸⁶ Cited in Hagen, 1992, p. 128.

¹⁸⁷ Ewers/Quest, 1982, p. 27, Baring, 1972, p. 69, Beier, 1993.

¹⁸⁸ Beier, 1993, p. 62.

for *general* strike, or stories such as that mentioned earlier of the “young building worker” in Berlin who shoved Minister Selbmann aside with the words “You’re no longer a worker. Your stories don’t interest us!”

However, a factor that complicates any attempt to interpret participants’ behaviour in class terms, whether through a high-contrast lens or by adoption of a graded schema such as Virdee’s, is that a monopoly claim to “hegemonic class consciousness” was advanced by the party of the ruling class, the SED. This lent a decided ambiguity to many of what in other situations would be perceived as “class conscious” acts. Consider, by way of illustration, the case of the (young!) Hennigsdorf steelworker who objected to fellow demonstrators tearing down pictures of the KPD leader of the 1930s, Ernst Thälmann, “because, after all, [...] we were workers”.¹⁸⁹ If, in defending Thälmann’s legacy, he was appealing to the principle that workers’ action against oppressive regimes was justified, this faced the not inconsiderable difficulty that the oppressive regime against which he was demonstrating was run by Thälmann’s comrades and in the name of the same ideals.

This ambivalence characterized the behaviour of many SED members on June 17. In Pritchard’s view the fact that labour movement veterans divided on that day is the crucial datum that contradicts the “workers’ rising” thesis. If the uprising “really was above all a ‘workers’ uprising”, he asks, “then why did the foremost bearers of that tradition behave in so ambivalent a fashion?” Why did so many of them vacillate, or even “chose the party over the class and acted vigorously to contain the unrest”? These veterans, he continues, “*many of whom were SED or FDGB functionaries*, were surely the *true bearers* of the traditions and collective memories of the German labour movement”. [italics GD].¹⁹⁰

The notion that labour movement veterans who had become functionaries were the “true bearers” of labour traditions in East Germany is one influential interpretation, indeed, it was a familiar trope in GDR historiography. The SED’s foundational myth conceived of these “activists of the First Hour” as a collective that embodied the authentic interests of the labour movement, regardless of their actual social position or of any mechanism by which they might continue to earn the support or respect (not to mention vote) of those they supposedly represented. However, a more plausible reading, in my view, is that beneath this rhetoric lay a highly complex and fragmented reality. First, “veterans” were divided along class lines. Some worked on the factory floor or as shop stewards, while others were elevated to positions – BGLs, managers, party and state officials – that either me-

¹⁸⁹ Leo, 1999, p. 68.

¹⁹⁰ Pritchard, 2000, p. 216.

diated between the classes or which directly enforced the rule of the *nomenklatura*. Second, although a significant degree of political unity between these various sections of the "active minority" existed in the initial post-war years, from 1947-8, any such unity grew thinner and more fragile. This fragmentation of the "labour movement veterans" culminated in the Uprising itself. On that day some trade unionists and socialists, typically workers and shop stewards, identified with workers in revolt.¹⁹¹ A large section vacillated. Still others, typically functionaries in upper and middle positions, supported the forces of the regime and their Soviet friends. According to this interpretation, the "veterans" did fracture, but because the lines of division tended to follow those of class, the process supports rather than contradicts the "workers' rising" thesis.

GERMAN VERSUS RUSSIAN TRADITIONS?

That 1953 witnessed, amongst many other things, a reappearance and in some instances a rallying of anti-Stalinist socialism is very well established. But what this represented is less certain. For some, particularly historians with social-democratic leanings, a re-assertion of specifically German labour movement traditions was involved, in opposition to the alien Russian forms that had been imposed, first on the KPD in the 1920s and then upon the SPD from 1946 onwards. Against the Russian taste for hierarchy the Germans espoused egalitarianism, against dictatorship the Germans favoured democracy. In this reading, the uprising represented, in part at least, a revolt of the indigenous labour movement against Stalinism.

The differences between the German labour movement, particularly the SPD, and Stalinist organizations are as obvious as they are legion. However, in certain respects these were kindred spirits. Both combined internationalism in rhetoric with nationalism in practice. For both, a determinist philosophy justified the according of historical agency to the party, with social change to be introduced from on high - by parliamentary representatives for social democrats, and by the

¹⁹¹ Many of these accused the regime of betraying its values, and attempted to reclaim socialist traditions and symbols. The literature on the rising is replete with stories of old-timers launching heartfelt attacks on the SED for having become distanced from, or even betrayed, the working class, or of images of workers singing socialist songs or marching behind the red flag – not for, but against the party. For example the SED member, in his fifties, and an elected spokesperson at a strike-bound Leipzig firm on June 18th, who justified the call for the government to resign with a plea that socialism must have a heart, "and that is what these people have lost" (Roth, 1999, p. 168). Cf. also Pritchard, 2000; Kowalczyk *et al.*, 1995, p. 214; Hagen, 1992, p. 63.

party, embodied in its politburo, for Stalinists; the masses, meanwhile, were cast essentially in a supporting role. Both forms of party were bureaucratic organizations that prioritized the maintenance of their own apparatus and displayed a profound mistrust towards self-directed (or “spontaneous”) grass-roots activity. Indeed, the book that has become a byword for the mistrust of the grass-roots by elitist officialdom, Robert Michels’s *Soziologie des Parteivesens*, was a study of the SPD. Finally, for most of the twentieth century both traditions advocated state capitalist economic policies.

In postwar East Germany the similarities between the two traditions go some way to explaining the manner in which the fusion of KPD and SPD occurred. The immediate reasons for that marriage – notably the large dose of intimidation applied to SPD functionaries but also the leftward shift within social democracy and the “bourgeois-democratic” lurch of the KPD in the 1934-47 period – have been well rehearsed, and need not be elaborated upon here. However, although intimidation played a role, the fact that SPD functionaries hailed from a political culture devoted to taking up positions within, and negotiating with, existing power structures doubtless encouraged them to take up offers of positions within the Soviet Zonal administration – and indeed to accept what Pritchard wryly describes as the Soviet equivalent of “corporate hospitality”.¹⁹²

As to the SPD rank-and-file membership in 1945, many were confused and lacking in confidence following the defeats of the early Weimar years, their party’s passivity in the face of Nazism, and twelve years of totalitarianism. In Pritchard’s words,

Whilst entertaining powerful but nonetheless nebulous hopes about a Socialist future, they did not normally possess any coherent or confident set of political ideas. [Moreover,] it took time for them to learn once again how to develop their own ideas in free and open debate with others. As a consequence of all these factors *there was a very strong tendency amongst rank-and-file Social Democrats (and, for that matter, amongst trade unionist and workplace council members as well) to be very dependent on their local functionaries.* [italics GD]¹⁹³

The SPD’s bureaucratic heritage, exacerbated by the lack of confidence on the part of ordinary members, meant that when “SPD functionaries who had been fostered by the Russians or appointed to public office” lent their support to uniting with the KPD, they were likely to pull their members with them. As Prit-

¹⁹² Pritchard, 2000, p. 112.

¹⁹³ Pritchard, 2000, p. 129.

chard puts it, "many Social Democrats trustingly followed their own functionaries into the ranks of the SED".¹⁹⁴

It would be misleading, of course, if the SPD were presented as a bureaucratic party through and through. The mentality and culture of bureaucracy were repeatedly challenged, most famously in the 1906 debate over the mass strike. In that debate, whereas the right wing perceived mass strikes as a threat to the party's interests (for, in the words of one trade union leader, "to develop our organizations further, we need peace in the labour movement"), radicals around Rosa Luxemburg championed them as the antidote to the institutional conservatism that, they feared, was suffocating grass-roots initiative.¹⁹⁵ Luxemburg took as her model the mass strikes during the 1905 revolution in Russia, drawing attention in particular to the politicising effect that occurred when diverse strikes interacted. The mass strike, she described,

originated from individual coalescing wage struggles, which [...] rapidly became political demonstrations; the economic factor and the scattered condition of trade unionism were the starting point; all-embracing class action and political direction the result.¹⁹⁶

At another stage the direction of this process would be reversed, with political strikes sparking claims elsewhere for wage rises and the eight-hour day. Mass strikes, she concluded, are unpredictable, they follow no set schedule:

Political and economic strikes, [...] peaceful wage struggles and street massacres, barricade fighting – all these run through one another, run side by side, cross one another, flow in and over one another – it is a ceaselessly moving, changing sea of phenomena.

It has been noted by James Cronin and Colin Barker, among others, that many of the features that Rosa Luxemburg describes in her pamphlet are characteristic of strike waves generally.¹⁹⁷ They affect a more varied cross-section of the workforce than industrial conflict normally does. Second, both political and economic demands are raised, whether simultaneously or in succession ("their unity", in Luxemburg's words, "is precisely the mass strike"). Third, they are marked in their upward curve by a surprisingly high rate of success. Fourth, their basic organizational unit is the strike committee. Finally, they possess a strong element

¹⁹⁴ Pritchard, 2000, p. 131.

¹⁹⁵ Schorske, 1972, p. 39.

¹⁹⁶ Luxemburg, 1970, p. 170.

¹⁹⁷ Cronin, 1979, p. 11; Barker, 1987.

of apparent spontaneity and innovation in organization and tactics. These features, Cronin suggests,

spring from the occasional and massive intervention of the rank-and-file into the affairs of labour-management relations. They are profoundly democratic movements which ordinarily develop as much in opposition to entrenched labour leaders as to employers or the state.¹⁹⁸

Each one of these features apply to the events of June 17 1953. There were “peaceful wage struggles” and even barricades. Economic and political demands were raised in tandem, both on the streets and in the workplace resolutions. Where strikes were able to take off, success was usually rapid, with managers disempowered and the security forces put under pressure or even routed. As regards spontaneity, innovation and strike committees, these are all such widely noted features of June 17 that no further comment is necessary.

In the SPD Rosa Luxemburg was always in a minority in her advocacy of the mass strike. Her articles on the subject were censored in the SPD press, and ultimately she was driven out of the party. The SPD, and the union federation linked to it, grew to be resolute opponents of the sort of “spontaneous” activity that Luxemburg espoused. In so far as the events of June 17 took the form of a mass strike, therefore, they cannot be taken as representing a return by social democrats to authentic “German” labour-movement traditions. Although this spirit could be seen in certain acts on June 17, for example where local FDGB officials sought to restrict strikers’ demands to “material” issues, in so far as former social democrats contributed to the “mass strike” character of the uprising they were not returning the labour movement to its true “German” nature but were engaging, wittingly or not, in a practical critique of their own tradition. In so far as they took part in acts of resistance after the declaration of martial law – such as the women in Jena who sat in the street to block the path of Russian tanks – they were acting in opposition to social democrat orthodoxy, as embodied in a declaration signed by the West Berlin SPD, together with the DGB union federation, and broadcast by RIAS already on the 17th, that called upon East Germans not to resist the imposition of martial law.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Cronin, 1979, p. 48.

¹⁹⁹ Koop, 2003, p. 308.

FROM 1953 TO 1989

Whether the protestors on June 17 cut with or against the grain of social democratic tradition, they certainly exposed the SED's claim to be the representative of the East German working class as wishful thinking if not cynical deception. SED leaders were shaken by the protests. Amidst uncharacteristic handwringing and apologies they were forced to admit that swathes of the working class were "embittered" and alienated from the party, and that at least a significant minority had drawn political conclusions, notably with respect to their own offices. If nothing else, Erich Honecker's report to the politbureau that demonstrators had subjected some of its members to "a barrage of stones and mud" can have left little doubt on that score.²⁰⁰ "We are sitting here like the defeated!", complained one member of the SED Central Committee. "What is the matter with the highest organ of our party? It's as if we have done something in our pants!"²⁰¹

The regime's response to the rising, as developed over subsequent days, months and years, proceeded along four main tracks. The first involved disciplining the apparatuses of power. A greater, not to say paranoid, emphasis was placed upon the loyalty and unity of the party and its allied mass organizations (FDGB, FDJ, etc.). Following victory in a fierce power struggle in which he very nearly lost his job, Ulbricht consolidated his position through renewed purges in the SED, FDGB and "block parties". In some cases a near clean sweep was made – for instance, around two-thirds of SED district and regional chiefs lost their jobs.²⁰² Secondly, the security forces were reconstructed, with a reorganization and expansion of the *Stasi*, as well as the establishment of "factory militias" (paramilitary brigades of regime loyalists). The third was to arrest, discipline or otherwise intimidate those who had voiced political dissent during the uprising. The fourth was to make concessions on social issues. The aftermath of the June rising saw significant improvements in pay, working conditions and welfare, as well as price cuts on over 12,000 items.²⁰³

If the tendency of the protests had been for political and material issues to intertwine, the thrust of the regime's response was to insist that the two were entirely separate. Thus, at the Hennigsdorf steelworks, according to Annette Leo, "[e]conomically, the workers had won a victory". Not only was the quota rise retracted, but pay deductions that had already been made were compensated.

²⁰⁰ Müller-Enbergs, 1991, p. 202.

²⁰¹ Grieder, 1999, p. 72.

²⁰² Weber, 1998.

²⁰³ Hübner, 1995, p. 151f.

“However, politically, [employees] were reprimanded and disciplined”.²⁰⁴ The authorities sought to construct a distinction between the majority of reasonable workers who had been drawn in to the protests due to understandable, economic grievances and a seditious minority that had organized the events in order to open a breach on behalf of West German “revanchism”. Although the majority of “ringleaders” arrested and imprisoned were ordinary workers, a stupendous effort was made to give the impression that the rising had been the work of West Germans and former Nazis²⁰⁵ as well as “lumpen” groups.²⁰⁶

These strategies, pursued over subsequent weeks and months, cannot be interpreted simply as blips or as the mere continuation of previous policy. They marked a watershed in the development of the East German state, especially in its relation to the working class. The rising severely dented the centre’s ability to hold down pay by decree: raising quotas by central edict was taboo from that moment on.²⁰⁷ Instead, decentralized bargaining between management and work-teams became the pivotal industrial relationship.²⁰⁸ The effect of the uprising on social policy, moreover, was profound and long-lasting. The extreme inequalities and wage differentiation of the 1948-53 period began to be ameliorated. The GDR gradually developed into a welfare state – due less to the regime’s plans than to struggles against it.

The uprising was not merely a passing shock to the SED leadership but signalled the dangers inherent in both repressive and reforming strategies. It came to symbolize the threat to its rule if hardship should afflict the masses or laxity and disunity weaken the state’s core support and institutions. As a collective memory it haunted the *nomenklatura*, influencing their psychology and policy from then on. “Insecurity among the East German leaders”, according to Hope Harrison, “deepened after the June 17 uprising. If it happened once, they feared, it could happen again”.²⁰⁹ Not only was Ulbricht himself tormented by the fear of a

²⁰⁴ Leo, 1999, p. 64.

²⁰⁵ Even though the SED’s own research into the political backgrounds of strike activists found only a low proportion of former Nazis. Hagen, 1992, p. 128.

²⁰⁶ In the witchhunts in Leipzig that followed the uprising, special venom was displayed towards prostitutes who had taken part, one of whom was sentenced to ten years. Roth, 1999, p. 406.

²⁰⁷ Roth, 1999, p. 378.

²⁰⁸ Roesler, 1994, p. 163.

²⁰⁹ Harrison, 1992, p. 28.

repetition,²¹⁰ but, in the words of Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, the rising "haunted the nightmares of functionaries until the last day of their rule".²¹¹

Thanks to the spectacular intensity of the uprising, its persistence over the following days in the teeth of military occupation, and the material concessions delivered in its wake, its defeat was not experienced as total. Nor could repression rob participants of the experience of the protest itself - the euphoria and solidarity, the "liberation from enforced hypocrisy and imposed pseudo-harmony, the possibility of speaking freely".²¹² In the short run, as interviews by Stasi officials at the time indicate, "a decisive politicization of broad layers of the population" occurred. There is also evidence that for years afterwards workers and peasants would talk of the coming of a "new 17th June".²¹³ As Mark Allinson puts it, the day "was often referred to in subsequent years as a symbol of the population's potential power". Its popular and insurrectionary character left an indelible impression in the memories of those who had participated. Even in the early 1990s the oral historian Lutz Niethammer and his colleagues could find, in Bitterfeld, recollections of the protest there - "Our town had never seen a demonstration like that; there was such an incredible spirit of enthusiasm".²¹⁴ To some extent, memories were also kept alive collectively, as "hidden transcripts". As Mitter and Wolle put it:

When, in workers' pubs, you would ask about what had actually happened on the 17th June 1953, the whispered reply would come: "we had one hell of a go at them at the top", and, quietly continuing, "and one day it'll go up again, only next time we're going to do it better".²¹⁵

However, maintaining folk memories of the rising was no easy task in a totalitarian order. Even whispers were relentlessly tracked down. By way of illustration, consider the case of a group of Leipzig textile engineers, as recounted by Annegret Schüle.²¹⁶ To commemorate the tenth anniversary of the rising, and in particular their arrested colleagues, a group of engineers met at their local pub. Hearing of the event, the Stasi launched surveillance operations which culminated in a two year prison sentence for one of them, on a charge of "seditious propaganda and agitation".

²¹⁰ According to a politburo colleague, cited in Ross, 2000, p. 58.

²¹¹ Mitter/ Wolle 1993 p. 161. For examples, see also Mittag, p.68; Mitter/Wolle, 1990 p. 125.

²¹² Hagen, 1992, p. 202

²¹³ Hagen, 1992, p. 204; Mitter, 1991, p. 33.

²¹⁴ Niethammer *et al.*, 1991, p. 166.

²¹⁵ Mitter/Wolle, 1993, p. 162.

²¹⁶ Schüle, 2001, p. 147. My gratitude to Olaf Klenke for this reference.

As this example implies, the suppression of the rising and subsequent beefing up of the security state tended to undermine remaining hopes in collective resistance. “Just stop talking about striking”, one worker reportedly moaned to his colleagues in the early 1960s, “everyone who strikes gets locked up. I was also locked up on 17/6/1953”.²¹⁷ With the partial exception of small strike waves in 1956, 1960-1 and 1970-2, virtually no significant struggles were able to break out beyond individual workplaces in the entire epoch between 1953 and 1989. The minority of non-SED “veterans” that bore memories of pre-Stalinist trade union and labour traditions gradually passed away and those memories with them. Collective memories of the 1945-53 struggles, with few or no collectives to bear them, withered.²¹⁸ Even in traditional SPD strongholds social democrat heritage and identities faded through the 1950s and 1960s.²¹⁹

The upshot was the complete marginalization of non-SED socialism in the GDR. Social democracy had been drastically weakened by Nazism, but had survived and resurged in 1945. In contrast to the head-on attack by Nazism, against which social democracy possessed a fairly robust immune system, the incorporation of the SPD into an increasingly Stalinist SED occurred along a more subtle, not to say insidious, route. As outlined above, the degree of commonality between KPD and SPD policies in 1945-6, coupled with techniques of bribery and intimidation, had persuaded numerous SPD functionaries to join the new organization. Grass-roots SPD members now saw SED policy being explained and defended by well-known functionaries from “their own” camp. And when the SED then turned to more overt attacks on workers’ interests, these seemed to – and did – come in part from within the social democrats’ own ranks. As Tobias Dürr has explained, in his study of one traditionally social democrat town:

The author of the compulsory measures as well as of the conditions of life and work that are experienced as unsatisfactory was the very same organization that also claimed to stand, as “party of the working class”, in the tradition of social democracy.²²⁰

Against this sort of encroachment from within, social democracy’s immune system was weak. Whereas niches of social democratic culture could exist under Nazism, their cultivation under the rule of the SED was less straightforward.

²¹⁷ Cited in Fulbrook, 1995, p. 158.

²¹⁸ For evidence of the repression of memories of 1953, see Niethammer *et al.*, 1991.

²¹⁹ Such as Freital, in Franz Walter’s account, 1993.

²²⁰ Dürr, 1993, p. 427.

After the 1953 uprising, distinctive SPD cultures died out, and more rapidly than one might have expected.²²¹

In this reading, 1953 marked a watershed for socialism in Germany. After surviving mass unemployment, the rise of Hitler, war, Soviet occupation and the most brutal phase of Stalinist rule (1948-52), the first long wave of the German socialist movement finally subsided in that year. After 1945 and especially after 1953, established networks of non-SED socialists fragmented and dissolved. Some joined the SED or became FDGB functionaries. Others retreated to their allotments and dachas.²²² Still others passed away.

In 1989 mass movements arose once again. But in contrast to 1953, or to Poland in 1980-1, there were relatively few strikes and relatively little sense of workers' power or class consciousness – whether “hegemonic” or “corporate”.²²³ These contrasting experiences may be due to the fact that the movements of 1953 and in Poland *began* with strike action and that this set the tone for subsequent events. In 1989, when significant strike action threatened, from November onwards, Citizens Movement organizations were in a position to nip it in the bud.²²⁴ But there was another difference that, I suspect, played a critical role. In Poland, as Lawrence Goodwyn has described in great detail, the methods and values of working-class resistance were cultivated and kept alive; they survived for years beneath the surface, erupting in public in the various movements and uprisings from 1956 through to 1980-1. In the process, traditions of independent workplace organization developed, and embodied an accumulated memory of strategic knowledge and skills. With anti-Stalinist movements based strongly in the workplaces, radical intellectuals tended to be drawn behind them. East Germany in 1989 provides a contrasting case both to Poland and to 1953. Virtually no non-SED labour traditions remained that could have influenced the course of events. Few if any activists remembered 1953 as their counterparts in Poland remembered 1976, 1970-1 and 1956,²²⁵ or as their predecessors in 1953 had remembered the movements of 1945-8 (or even of 1918-23).

²²¹ See Walter *et al.*, 1993.

²²² If this latter process was hastened by the suppression of the uprising, there may be some truth in the contention that it was “from around this time [1953] that the tendency towards withdrawal into the private sphere, and accommodation within the existing relations began to prevail”. Bust-Bartels, 1980, p. 28.

²²³ For accounts that uncover more than is usually known of this “unknown face of the GDR revolution” see the articles and documents in Gehrke and Hürtgen, 2001. See also Dale, 2004.

²²⁴ cf. Dale 1996, 2004.

²²⁵ cf. Goodwyn, 1991.

As a result the uprising in 1989 was very different to that of 1953. There were recognisable similarities in the goals of participants. That the government should resign is an obvious one. That elections be held is another.²²⁶ The demonstrators of 1953 also called for the abolition of the border between the two Germanies, for the withdrawal of all occupying powers and, if less frequently, for German unification.²²⁷ But that 1953 should be seen as a direct forerunner of 1989, as several German historians have suggested, is rather far-fetched. At the core of the former was a mass strike, its organizational spine formed by the strike committees – those “council-like organs of the working class”, as described by Ewers and Quest, “which established a sort of ‘counter power’ in the workplaces”.²²⁸ The movement involved a fusion of workers’ struggles against their employers, political calls for democracy, and insurrection. And although many participants may have envisaged liberal democracy as a pressing goal, a more radical edge could be heard too. Workers in Potsdam district, for example, insisted to the local SED party secretary that “We want to govern ourselves and build our government from below”.²²⁹ The demand for a “workers’ government” was also voiced, notably by Hennigsdorf steel workers and the Bitterfeld-Wolfen inter-factory strike committee. In 1989, participatory democracy was a guiding ideal too, above all for supporters of the Citizens Movement organizations. But without the workplace and inter-factory strike committees, and without the insurrectionary activity that cleared the way for the formation of revolutionary town councils as in Görlitz, the organizational forms in which that ideal could have been vested were lacking. In 1953, as Stefan Brant put it, “in East Berlin, in Brandenburg, Magdeburg, Görlitz and in the industrial area around Halle and Leipzig the workers had a brief opportunity to seize power”.²³⁰ In 1989 there were also periods in which power lay on the streets. But unlike in 1953 few were prepared to pick it up.

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²²⁶ Although in 1953 this demand often carried the proviso “in both parts of Germany,” implying that Bonn might benefit from “regime change” too.

²²⁷ Koop, 2003, p. 340; Roth 1999 p. 608; Diedrich, 1991, pp. 42, 152.

²²⁸ Ewers and Quest, 1982, p. 26.

²²⁹ Koop, 2003, p. 164.

²³⁰ Brant, 1955, p. 133.

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