

June 22, 1953

**Secret 'Report on the Events in Berlin on 16 and 17
June 1953,' from P. Naumov, Correspondent in
Berlin to D.T. Shelipov, Editor-in-Chief of Pravda, 22
June 1953**

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Summary:

Naumov in his report gave a very detailed account of the events in Berlin on 16 and 17 June 1953.

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

During the events in Berlin on 16 and 17 June, I was almost always on the streets and observed the unrest in all detail. Perhaps my account, comprising solely my own impressions, might be interesting to you and other colleagues. On 16 June at noon, I heard that the construction workers at Stalinallee had stopped work and began moving in columns towards the government quarters. I drove to the city center together with reporters from Komsomolskaya Pravda and TASS. As we drove down Stalinallee, we saw that work had ceased at all construction sites. On the scaffolding one could see three to four workers who had stopped working. Groups of people were gathering on the sidewalks along the entire avenue, talking about the event. Groups of this kind, through which the columns of strikers marched, stood everywhere on Alexanderplatz, and further towards the city center. On Marx-Engels-Platz we saw the first construction workers (they wore white work apparel), who were returning. On the boulevard Unter den Linden, there were even more such construction workers. Many of them were surrounded by people to whom they were telling something. We reached the column of striking workers at the square in front of the House of Ministries of the GDR on Leipziger Strasse. They stood in front of the House, whistling, screaming and yelling: "[We want to see] Ulbricht or Grotewohl!" At the center, one could recognize blue cloth poster with the writing "We demand the reduction of norms!" According to our rough estimates, the nucleus of the crowd was comprised of some 2,000 people. As many as that were standing around. Most of them were officials of the ministries who had come out onto the street out of curiosity or with the intention of talking with the workers. In a window on the first floor, Deputy Prime Minister Heinrich Rau and Minister [Fritz] Selbmann appeared. The latter stood on the window ledge and attempted to speak. The roar of the crowd drowned out his words. Later a small table was brought out of the House into the middle of the throng. Selbmann climbed on top of it. His very first words were booed. Again and again he tried to speak. His announcement that the government decreed to repeal the enforced norm increase could clearly be heard on the entire square. The people roared, Selbmann could no longer speak. An elderly man in construction worker attire raised himself up onto the table. He said that he had been sent to a concentration camp by Hitler as a fighter for the rights of workers, and now he saw his duty to defend these rights once again. The people applauded him. From this man we heard the demands of the strikers for the very first time: annulment of the increased work norms; decrease in prices in the state-owned businesses (HO); general increase in living standards for workers; abandonment of the formation of the People's Army in the Republic; holding of free elections in Germany--during this speech Selbmann came down. Then a girl stepped up, dressed in a FDJ blouse; at first she was whistled at, but then one worker or other called for order, and the girl began to speak. We could not understand what she was speaking about, but after some hours the American radio in West Berlin, RIAS, reported that she cautioned the workers to be careful. We in the FDJ were sent here to spy on you. The throng of people supported her. They applauded with roaring approval. The next one was Professor Robert Havemann--chairman of the Committee for the Defense of Peace in Berlin. He wasn't allowed to speak for long. The next speaker--a professor from the University of Berlin--said only two words and was forced to leave the rostrum. Until the end of the demonstration, only the striking workers were allowed to speak. One of them repeated once again the demands, and the people supported him with hand signals. We always heard "[We want to see] Ulbricht or Grotewohl." At the edge of the crowd some officials or party functionaries tried to convince the workers that their actions were mistaken. We got close to these groups. The conversation usually ended with the worker replying to the agitator, "You are employed by the authorities and earn a good living. You have no idea how the workers live. You do not care one bit about the workers, they don't matter to you, so there is no point in talking to you." The first beatings occurred here. Near me stood an elderly intellectual (presumably an official or party functionary). When the next speaker proclaimed pure Bonn slogans, he cried across the entire square, "This man is a fascist!" The men leaped upon him and gave him a good beating with their fists. Without getting to see Ulbricht or Grotewohl, at 2 p.m. the crowd marched further down the street. The procession lasted until about 6 p.m. The demonstrators marched along the streets and called out in chorus for Berliners to join in a general strike at 7 a.m. on 17 June. We went together with the reporter from KOMSOMOLSKAYA PRAVDA, Comrade Beresinski, to the end of the demonstration and wrote down all slogans which the strikers repeated. They follow here: "We demand a raise in living standards!" "We demand a reduction of norms!"

“We are workers, not slaves!” “We want to be free men!” “We demand free elections!” “We want butter, not the People's Army!” “Down with the People's Army!” “The HO hits us with a knockout punch!” “We demand a 40 percent drop in prices in the HO!” As the columns marched by the Central Committee building, the demonstrators cried in unison: “Where is Wilhelm Pieck?” (Later we heard that a rumor was going around in the population that Pieck had been arrested in the Soviet Union.) [...]1. It is absolutely clear that the slogans were created in advance. There were some centers where organizers entered and exited. They announced the next slogan and determined the pace of its repetition.2. On 16 June no slogans appeared that were directed against the government of the GDR, the SED, or the Soviet Union. Only on the next day, 17 June, did they manifest themselves. With the procession of the column, the atmosphere heightened in tension. Here and there beatings occurred. Among the ranks of the strikers, those hesitating were beaten and driven away. If a youth appeared wearing a FDJ shirt, he was beaten as well. Not far from Rosenthaler Platz, a car equipped with a loudspeaker came out from one of the side streets. The speaker was merely announcing the government's decision to annul the norm increase. The striking workers, most of them young men, jumped onto the car, shattered the windshields and loudspeaker, and tried to tip over the car. On Rosenthaler Platz, another car outfitted with a loudspeaker appeared. The demonstrators fell immediately upon the car, dragged the driver and speaker out and took their place. This car drove alongside the ranks of the strikers to the very end. Now, however, one heard the call to a general strike from the loudspeaker. All inhabitants along the streets where the strikers marched down, hung out of their windows. It happened that they greeted the strikers enthusiastically, but this was relatively seldom. The common folk did not understand it. When the columns ran into workers (involved in clearing away ruins, repairing streets and tram tracks, working on construction sites), they called on them to join the ranks of the strikers. All workers immediately stopped working. Even on the scaffolding of the SED Central Committee building, where the façade was being repaired, the workers collected their tools and came down below. It is difficult to tell how many of them then joined the demonstrators. The high point of the commotion was reached in front of the Police headquarters building. The strikers grossly insulted the members of the People's Police, who were leaning out from their windows. But on this day it did not result in riots. When the construction workers returned to Stalinallee, they chose to return home or remain on the streets to discuss further [what to do]. But the instigators and apparently a paid mob (youth for the most part, between 17 and 22 years old) continued further down the Stalinallee, ending at a restaurant, as we later found out. The ruffians yelled the same slogans, called for a general strike, and beat up FDJ members they happened to come across. On 16 June there was just this one column of marchers and one single strike in the democratic [East] sector of Berlin. Not even so much as one People's Police officer appeared the entire way of the march. Even the traffic controllers left their posts when the marchers approached. There were no Soviet troops in Berlin on this day. Behind the marchers, groups of people formed on the streets, who discussed the event. On Unter den Linden, Alexanderplatz, and Stalinallee such groups could be seen everywhere. The discussions lasted until deep into the night. [...]When I returned to the correspondents' point (after 6 p.m.), I listened to the broadcasts by the American radio station, RIAS. The strike in East Berlin was the only topic. The demonstration in front of the House of Ministries and the course of the marchers (the entire group of Western correspondents, many of whom I know personally, followed the strikers) were covered in detail. Then commentators spoke, the head of the trade unions in West Berlin, [Ernst] Scharnowski, and others. The content of their speeches: Workers in East Berlin, you have chosen the right time for the uprising. The regime of the SED has gone bankrupt. The SED calls its failures “mistakes,” but they are not mistakes, but crimes. A worker makes a mistake; he is thrown in jail. How can one let the crimes of the SED go unpunished? Workers, your task is to take advantage of the SED's bankruptcy to achieve the “maximum”: the ouster of the regime. One could also hear such statements proclamations as: The USSR has for a long time speculated on the idea of German reunification. Workers in East Berlin, demand free elections in Germany and help to unmask the mistaken policies of the USSR. RIAS intermittently broadcast uninterrupted the pronouncement that the general strike in East Berlin was planned

for the 17 June at 7 a.m. After 10 p.m., RIAS broadcast the special session of the West Berlin city legislature. All speakers quite frankly supported the striking workers and promised aid and support, etc. In the evening we drove to the city center to listen in on the discussions among the people. On Stalinallee I heard such discussions in about ten groups (every group comprised of 20 to 40 people). For the most part specially prepared agitators spoke, passing from one group to another. I followed one and confirmed my finding. The content of the discussions: eight years have now passed since the end of the war, but there hasn't been any improvement in the life of the East German worker. The SED always feeds us with promises. They constantly urge us to work harder, but with our wages we can't even have a decent meal, not to mention clothing. Under the capitalists, workers live much better (referring to West Germany). The SED corrupts individual workers, provides them with good living conditions, so that they betray their comrades. In the pursuit of higher productivity, the SED clearly committed crimes. On the Stalinallee several roofs already have leaks, so that they have to be redone. That happened because the SED demanded the completion of construction by 1 May. In some groups the following conversations take place: Who divided Germany? — The communists. Who makes slaves of us? — The communists, etc. But the main topics were wages, high prices, lower pensions, housing issues, etc. Among all groups, Western propaganda prevailed. Only in one group did I see an argument between a Western agitator and, probably, a member of the SED. It was a deplorable sight. The SED member, stammering, sputtered trite phrases. He could not answer concrete questions whatsoever (perhaps he did not know the situation). Then he fell silent, as if he agreed with his enemy. The people laughed at him, and he quickly disappeared. Sometime around 10 p.m., a group of youths (likely sent from the Western sector) tried once again to march through the streets to call for a general strike. They were dispelled by the People's Police at Unter den Linden. As we drove down Stalinallee at 7:30 a.m., we saw already the first column of demonstrators, some 7,000 to 10,000 people. The columns united somewhere, and at 9 a.m. the first large column (some 30,000) reached Unter den Linden. During these hours two more large columns of marchers proceeded down this street. Later the demonstrators concentrated on three main squares: Potsdamer Platz, where three sectors intersect (Soviet, American, British); Alexanderplatz and the adjacent streets, where the Police Presidium building is located; Leipziger Strasse near the House of Ministries. The demonstrations bore a purely political character from the beginning. Alongside the slogans from the previous day, new ones appeared: "Down with the Grotewohl government!", "Down with the SED regime!" The demonstrators continually cried out in unison. The people were dressed completely differently from the day before. No work attire could be seen. The provocateurs from West Berlin were easily recognizable by their appearance and behavior. They were adequately represented in every column of marchers and formed the nucleus of the riots heroes and shouters. One must say that with every stride and pace, good organization was noticeable. When the first processions of demonstrators marched past the USSR diplomatic mission to the GDR, many people tried to shout, to whistle, and utter insults. Momentarily men (obviously specially selected and instructed) jumped forward, calling on them not to make any noise, "so as not to provoke the Russians." Strike sentries were posted on the corner of the streets, and when someone or other wanted to leave the crowd of people, they pushed them back in. The Soviet troops appeared on the streets of Berlin in the early morning. First they drove around without impeding the movement of the columns. At first they were greeted by the demonstrators with whistling and roaring, and as the atmosphere grew more tense, the insults began. I heard several times "Russian swine" and "ape." Such insults could not only be heard from the ranks of the demonstrators, but also from the residents who were afraid to join the columns. It was said that in a few cases the demonstrators fell upon the cars of Soviet soldiers, even upon tanks. Sometimes they threw stones at the soldiers. Once our car got into the middle of the crowd of people (it was still morning, their passions had not been inflamed yet). When they saw the Soviet license plate, some youths came towards us and shouted, threatening, "Russians, get out!" We got out of our car and mingled with the people. They did nothing to the car. Two hours after this, bandits at Alexanderplatz tipped over the car of the representative from the "Sovexportfilm," Comrade Pronin, with him in it. At the height of the events, we came to Potsdamer

Platz. A rally was being held. A stage stood in the middle. They brought a microphone and loudspeaker from the British sector. It was impossible to recognize who spoke, but the message was the same as in the RIAS broadcasts. Then the crowd of people rushed to the "Kolumbushaus," where there used to be a department store of the HO. One of the People's Police officers who had been guarding the store was pushed to the side, the other one the bandits stripped, throwing his clothes down from the first floor. Soon afterwards the building was set on fire. The kiosks and billboards were likewise set on fire. Around the same time, a fight broke out between a cordon of People's Police officers, who were guarding the House of the GDR Ministries on Leipziger Strasse, and the putschists. The police were using their truncheons. They were almost overwhelmed, when suddenly Soviet tanks arrived and deterred the mob. Rowdies did, however, destroy the windows on the first floor. Many riots ensued, in particular at Alexanderplatz and near Police headquarters. There, cars were tipped over and set on fire, the windows in the Soviet shop, "Das Internationale Buch," were smashed. On the first floor of Police headquarters, not one window remained intact. In front of this very building, three police cruisers were incinerated. The People's Police did not shoot. I myself saw several cars with West Berlin license plates, with American and other foreign plates, which drove around the areas where the riots took place. The demonstrators did not stop them, but sometimes greeted them enthusiastically. Besides Potsdamer Platz, there was another loudspeaker from West Berlin behind the Brandenburg Gate. Through it commands were continually given. When martial law was declared in the Soviet sector, the demonstrators began slowly to draw back. [...]1. According to my careful estimates, some 100,000 people actively took part in the demonstrations on 17 June. In the course of one to one and a half hours, three columns of marchers comprised each of 20,000 to 30,000 people proceeded down Unter den Linden. Moreover, many people who were afraid of joining the ranks followed behind the procession of demonstrators. They all participated in the protests, forming large crowds of people. 2. One must admit that in the mass of people, the hatred of the Soviet people remained latent and now once again became inflamed. In the course of the demonstrations, this hatred revealed itself quite clearly. Several minor but characteristic facts: On the morning of 17 June, one German woman who worked with us in radio as a telegrapher was exposed to gross insults in a shop by some 50 Hausfrauen from her neighborhood. They threatened to beat her because she worked "for the Russians." Everyone in the store was against her, even the vendor. She was forced to leave the shop quickly. The neighbors even threatened our cleaning lady. 3. Not only backwards workers participated actively in the strikes and demonstrations, but also a number of activists and new workers, including members of the SED. For example, on 16 June we came across one "activist" from the Stalinallee construction project and a SED member known to us, Scherpinski, among the ranks of the strikers in front of the House of Ministries. 4. The SED displayed complete ignorance of the mood of the masses, lack of connection with the classes, an inability to speak to the people. The behavior of the party members during the unrest cannot be described as anything but cowardly. On 16 June, at the beginning of the strikes on Stalinallee, the reporter from Soviet radio in Berlin, Comrade Smirnov, spoke with the party secretary of Block 40, where the strike began. This man admitted that he had already known about the preparations for the strike four days before. Even more: the work at the construction site had already stopped at 11 a.m. on the 15 June. [...]5. No doubt that this operation was carefully and well planned in advance and was led from a center. [Source: TsKhSD (Moscow), per. 4546, op. 30, pap. 5, ll. 72-86. Published in German in Gerhard Beier, *Wir wollen freie Menschen sein* (Köln: Bund, 1993), pp. 163-168. Translated by Christiaan Hetzner.]