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A Dissident Describes Police Brutality in Dresden (October 7, 1989)

During the late summer and early fall of 1989, masses of East German citizens fled the GDR over the Austro-Hungarian border. Those who stayed behind became increasingly critical of the SED and state leadership and expressed their discontent in public demonstrations. The atmosphere was in no way conducive to the type of gala festivities planned by the regime in honor of the GDR's 40th anniversary on October 7, 1989. That day, peaceful protests occurred in several East German cities, including East Berlin. The protests were immediately suppressed by violent means and more than 1,000 GDR citizens were arrested. In the following account, a Dresden dissident describes an unexpected outbreak of police violence against a peaceful assembly of ordinary citizens.

I am stunned by the brutal actions of the security forces of the GDR on the evening of October 7, 1989, and in the period that followed, in the area around the International Restaurant on Prager Straße in Dresden.

I am stunned by the brute force that members of the riot police felt they had to use against citizens who had gathered absolutely peacefully and whose only offense was violating the prohibition against so called riotous assemblies, as defined by state legislation.

I am stunned by the harrowing lack of conception of this police operation.

Originally, the operation might well have been geared toward observing and removing violent citizens, but in the utter absence thereof, peaceful citizens were arbitrarily seized and “transported.” My own actions were initially motivated by pure curiosity about what was happening on the aforementioned square, but after entering the open space between the police and the citizens I quickly recognized the escalating danger in which both sides found themselves.

I picked up a discarded candle lying on the pavement and lit it, sat down on a bench and prayed for nonviolence.

When a voice resounded from the loudspeakers, calling for people to leave the square immediately – since they would start clearing it in a minute – I also got up and started walking slowly.

If I had only had slightest inkling of what was to come, I probably would have run.

Apparently I was being watched. Before the minute was up, two plainclothes security officers with rubber nightsticks grabbed me, twisted my arms, and ran with me behind the police line.

There, I was handed over to riot police on standby; they struck me on the shoulder and back with nightsticks, commenting to their colleagues that I was one of the bastards they had caught.

Holding me by the arms and beard, they brought me to a truck parked nearby.

While striking my head, shoulder, back, and buttocks, they threw me into the back of the truck, which was already filled with others. After I had withstood continued blows and a minor dog bite, they shouted at me, ordering me to lower my head, put my hands behind my neck, and stay still.

The truck was totally full in no time; when it left, two or three layers of people had been loaded for transport.

When one of us “transportees” felt the need to express pain, one or two police officers made an immediate move toward the pack of bodies, found whoever was moaning and struck that person until silence or unconsciousness set in.

No distinction was made between men and women.

After arriving at one of the Dresden station houses of the riot police, we were ripped from the truck and beaten, especially those who had fallen over because their legs had fallen asleep.

Amidst shouting and isolated blows we were herded into the truck garages.

We had to stay there for about two hours and were subjected to humiliating treatment – legs spread apart with our hands behind our necks.

Then the detainees were forced into holding quarters in a manner deemed adequate by the security officers.

I should not fail to mention that use of the toilet was permitted, and a pot with tea was ready and waiting.

After another two hours prison officers appeared, handcuffed us together in twos, pushed us into prisoner transport vehicles, and drove us to Bautzen Prison.¹

When we were brought in, that is, as we went up the stairs – it was the old Bautzen prison church – I was beaten, along with all the other prisoners, as though we were going through a mill. This, however, was the last time – at least for me.

¹ Bautzen Prison was one of the most notorious and brutal penal institutions of the GDR – ed.

I will not go on about my sad and discouraging experience in the prison within the scope of this report. Perhaps just enough to say that all the prisoners and detainees in the larger basement rooms of one wing of the prison shared the same fate and no one really knew why he was in jail.

On Sunday afternoon I was brought to my first interrogation. The second interrogation took place on Sunday evening and I was told that preliminary proceedings had been filed against me for riotous assembly. Sunday night the magistrate explained to me that a warrant had been issued for my arrest.

So-called judicial summary proceedings against me took place the following Wednesday. The prosecutor moved that the "Christian citizen Steffen Altmann" – that is how I understood the designation – receive a prison sentence of 14 days.

The verdict of the "High Court," however, called for the preliminary proceedings to be discontinued.

On Thursday afternoon I was released from Bautzen Prison.

On Friday, October 13, 1989, I was put on sick leave until at least October 27, 1989, on account of trauma-related headaches.

Dresden, October 18, 1989
Steffen Altmann, 48 years old

Source: Steffen Altmann, "Fünf Tage im Oktober" ["Five Days in October]" (October 18, 1989), Stadtmuseum Dresden (Dresden City Museum).

Translation: Allison Brown