



Volume 9. Two Germanies, 1961-1989
Protest March in Bonn (October 12, 1981)

Between 250,000 and 300,000 demonstrators gathered in Bonn on October 10, 1981, to protest NATO's Dual-track Decision, thereby forming the largest rally in West German history to date. Despite the differing political platforms of the various groups participating in the rally, the demonstrators exhibited a surprising degree of solidarity and were determined to conduct a peaceful march.

Bonn: Half Fortress, Half Festival

Observations at the March of 250,000 in the Hofgarten¹

Some have already spent the night on Poppelsdorfer Allee. It's cold and rainy. At 5:26am, the first chartered train arrives at the main train station. The residents of Bonn have parked their cars on side streets. The police are standing by: white helmets, pistols, but no rubber clubs. Three thousand civilian marshals. As the hours go by, the city is transformed into a combination of fortress and festival.

Five columns of marchers form and set off toward the Hofgarten. Only a quarter of the 250,000 protesters (or 300,000? Or even more?) find space there. The rest of them spread out all over. Bonn has 285,000 residents. You can see them – provided that they themselves are not outside on the streets – behind their curtains; some wave happily, others look doubtful and frightened. What will this day bring?

On the streets, the first information booths start springing up. Two young people are schlepping a two-meter-long, papier-mâché bomb on a moped. It reads, "This is the cross of our time." The people from the Committee for Peace and Disarmament have painted skeletons on their white tunics. Mothers are carrying infants in their arms. Even some dogs, well-behaved on leashes, are wearing signs. For example: "I sh** on the neutron bomb."

¹ A park in Bonn's city center – trans.

People are laughing a lot. Total strangers link arms. White flags and banners outnumber red ones. Even the DKP [German Communist Party] refrained from using its color [red] here and there: little white doves flutter on the background of its flag. The lettering is green.

Pre-march rallies are taking place all over. Helmut Gollwitzer's² voice comes through the loudspeaker, loud and full of emotion: "Helmut, we're coming. Helmut, we're coming."³ He makes reference to the Easter March movement. "Resist!" he calls out. You can hear words like "people's struggle" and "revolt of the masses" being shouted out.

[. . .]

Many stores, especially jewelry, clothing, and fur stores, are not only closed, but some storefront windows have also been boarded shut to protect against possible stone-throwing. Demonstrators spray-paint their comments on these wooden planks. One reads: "Dear business owner, even a second wooden wall won't help when a neutron bomb is dropped." A driver who couldn't find a secure parking spot in front of his home put a sign on his windshield for safety's sake: "Trade unionist for peace." Some of the people marching here want to wait a while before they do what they have planned. At the Douglas perfumery on Kaiserplatz, you can read slogans like: "You have the might; we have the night" and "Break a leg! Who's afraid of the first stone?"

Music is everywhere: Irish folk music with bagpipes, workers' songs, chansons. Suddenly it's all drowned out. "Peoples of the world, hear the signals." The song of the American civil rights movement "We shall overcome." Young DKP people try to sing along, but they apparently don't know the words.

The speeches at the main event are virtually impossible for many to hear. For those who never make it to the Hofgarten, there's no such thing as shared euphoria. But even those who didn't see or hear anything and finally went to a pub to escape the rain aren't disappointed. They halfway expected that to happen. "It isn't so important. The main thing is that so many people have come, that's really great."

Celebrities on folding chairs. Erhard Eppler, Heinrich Böll, retired general [Gerd] Bastian, military theorist [Alfred] Mechttersheimer, who has been threatened with expulsion from the CSU, Professor Gollwitzer, actor and singer Harry Belafonte, Coretta King, widow of the murdered Martin Luther King. In her speech, Petra Kelly, the federal chair of the Greens, demands that Chancellor [Helmut] Schmidt step down, and she declares Eppler, so to speak, the new chancellor. Eppler folds his hands under his chin and rolls his eyes upward. The only speaker up there who slips into screeching demagoguery is Uta Ranke-Heinemann, the daughter of the

² Lutheran theologian and pastor, and critic of the Vietnam war and the arms race – trans.

³ Gollwitzer's forewarning is to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt – trans.

former federal president. An embarrassing appearance: “Our politicians don’t notice that they’re crazy. We don’t want people dying for foreign megalomania.”

Eppler gives interviews backstage in German, English (fluent), French (not quite as fluent): “The SPD presidium met five weeks ago. I told them I was going to be speaking here, and no one had any problem with it, not even Herbert Wehner.” Eppler is the most important speaker here, it seems. Pastor [Heinrich] Albertz refers to him as the possible leader of a new party to the left of the SPD. And when senior FDP politician William Borm gives his speech, he is confronted with chants of “Eppler! Eppler!”

The rally is over at around 5:30pm. Only the Communist Workers’ League of Germany (KABD) continues to expatiate along Poppelsdorfer Allee on the subject of “a nuclear-free Europe from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains.” Their rendition of their hymn “We are the young guard of the proletariat” is slightly disrupted by members of the Hare Krishna sect who dance by, passing out cookies to onlookers.

At the Hofgarten, the most unlikely thing happens. A message goes out over a loudspeaker on the stage and in response hundreds of people crawl through the mud collecting paper and trash. It is gathered in huge piles to facilitate the great clean-up by Bonn’s sanitation department. At Hotel Bristol, which not only let the marchers use the bathroom but the patio as well, the doorman praises the discipline of the peace demonstrators.

People are looking for their buses. Others are running to catch their trains. Some drop the stones they brought from home, as Heinrich Böll warmly requested in his closing words.

Train station, 6 pm. A young blond boy of five is waiting for the train with his parents. The message “I don’t want any atomic bombs” is written on the back of his long white shirt. A dove is painted on the front. Many demonstrators can’t find their departure meeting-points. Many of the numerous people who are wandering around lost in the “Auswärtiges Amt” [“Foreign Ministry”] subway station have set up a night camp. The next day is stormy and rainy, and the city is back to normal.

Source: “Bonn, halb Festung halb Festival. Beobachtungen beim Aufmarsch der 250 000 im Hofgarten” [“Bonn: Half Fortress, Half Festival. Observations at the March of 250,000 in the Hofgarten”], *Die Welt*, October 12, 1981.

Translation: Allison Brown