

# 100 Years Ago: Far-Right Coup against Germany's Weimar Republic. The March 1920 Kapp Putsch against Social Democracy

Analysis of General Erich Ludendorff's Position

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*A century ago, on 13 March 1920, a far-right coup d'état was implemented against the nascent Weimar Republic, known as the Kapp Putsch, which stood as an early warning signal for the Nazi Party's rise. The author here had intended to write a piece in March on the exact centenary date, but a certain virus intervened instead.*

The Kapp Putsch was an attempt to destroy Social Democratic governance in Germany, and replace it with an outright dictatorship. The new regime would be led, on paper, by **Dr Wolfgang Kapp**, a reactionary 61-year-old Prussian civil servant and politician. The reality on the ground suggests otherwise, however. Partaking in this coup from the outset were prominent German military men, including **General Erich Ludendorff**, one of the major figures in 20th century history.

During the First World War, Ludendorff had been the de facto dictator of Germany for a two year period, from the autumn of 1916 until the conclusion of hostilities. In the following years Ludendorff was positioned at separate times on the right, but mostly towards the far-right, of the political spectrum. He disseminated the stab-in-the-back legend and, as he got older, became increasingly militaristic and anti-semitic. Ludendorff strongly criticised the "terrible inroads" and pernicious effects that Roman Catholicism was having on the German people.

Occasionally it has been claimed that Ludendorff was "the first Nazi", but there is little evidence to provide substance to this assertion. While lauded for his numerous victories in warfare, it can be recalled that in the field of politics he was inexperienced at best; like so many military commanders, Ludendorff would lack the temperament and judgement to make a telling transition to the political arena.



Putschists in Berlin. The banner warns: "Stop! Whoever proceeds will be shot". (CC BY-SA 3.0 de)

At war's end, following a three month exile in the southern Swedish town of Hässleholm, Ludendorff returned to Berlin in February 1919. The 53-year-old general continued to don his World War One uniform. As a consequence, Ludendorff was quickly recognised by some of his supporters in Berlin who, astonished to see him walking down the street, began cheering loudly. Richard J. Evans, the veteran English historian, wrote of Ludendorff, "Such was the prestige he had gained in the war, that he quickly became the figurehead of the radical right" (1). Donald J. Goodspeed, Ludendorff's biographer, acknowledged that he "commanded considerable respect throughout the country". (2)

In March 1921, Ludendorff was introduced to the little known extremist politician Adolf Hitler, when the latter had by then been a Nazi Party member for about a year (3). Ludendorff and Hitler would be on close terms during the mid-1920s. In late 1924 Ludendorff, largely because of his illustrious name, was elected to the Reichstag as an MP with the pan-Germanic association, the National Socialist Freedom Party (NSFP). Ludendorff co-founded the NSFP with Albrecht von Graefe, a fascist German politician and landowner who was an early associate of Hitler. In February 1925 the NSFP was absorbed into the Nazi Party, two months after Hitler's release from Landsberg Prison. Ludendorff therefore became a fully-fledged Nazi Party MP, and would remain so until 1928.

By the beginning of the 1930s, Ludendorff was issuing stark public warnings against Hitler (4). Lee McGowan, senior lecturer in European Politics at Queen's University Belfast, wrote that "Ludendorff, one of Hitler's initial but temporary rivals, was one of the few individuals to register doubts" about the Nazi leader. McGowan highlighted that Ludendorff's "concern" regarding Hitler "was ignored" by those who later put him in power. Ludendorff prophetically described Hitler as "one of the greatest demagogues of all time" who would "cast our Reich into the abyss and bring our nation to inconceivable misery". (5)

In his prime, Ludendorff was possessed with bundles of energy, intelligence and ruthlessness. These character traits, blended with a rare talent for tactical organisation,

made him a formidable leader in war. Lieutenant-Colonel Goodspeed, professor emeritus at Brock University in Ontario, called him “the guiding genius of the German Army”. By early 1920 Ludendorff’s ambition, or rather his megalomania, was sky high. Appalled by the Treaty of Versailles signed in late June 1919, Ludendorff’s aim was to reassume the dictatorship of Germany as soon as feasibly possible, restore her lost territories, and thereafter grant his nation the “place in the sun” she deserved. For now, recognising Germany’s unfavourable international position, Ludendorff proceeded with some caution.

The nominal leader of the impending putsch, Wolfgang Kapp, was elected to the Reichstag in January 1919 as a monarchist. In September 1917 Kapp had been a leading founder of the far-right German Fatherland Party (Deutsche Vaterlandspartei). He was a firm backer of Ludendorff’s expansionist programs in the war, including the hawkish strategy of unrestricted U-boat attacks. Goodspeed noted that Kapp was “a portly intriguer who for many years had been a hard-working but obscure civil servant in the East Prussian Lands Offices. During the war, Kapp had won some notoriety as a leader of the opposition to the relatively moderate policies of Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg”. (6)

By August 1919 Kapp sought out General Ludendorff, and became acquainted with him in person. In October 1919 they established the right-wing National Association (Nationale Vereinigung), an organisation considered the “crystallisation core” of the Kapp Putsch. Another key member of the National Association was Captain Waldemar Pabst, a high-ranking German officer who would later make contact with Hitler and Mussolini. Pabst gained infamy for ordering the executions of the revolutionary socialists, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, on 15 January 1919 (7). The loss in particular of Luxemburg, one of the most remarkable women in modern times, was a serious blow to the socialist movement.

In the opening weeks of 1920 the Freikorps, German paramilitary groups comprising ex-World War One soldiers, were openly debating a manoeuvre that would overthrow the Weimar Republic. The 39-year-old Pabst, commander of the Freikorps Guards Cavalry, was one of the first to be drawn into the scheme. He rented an office in central Berlin, and rallied those who were convinced that a coup was needed to save the Fatherland. Colonel Max Bauer joined the plotters. He was a distinguished soldier and Ludendorff’s Chief of Operations from 1916 to 1918.

Kapp still required a mighty sword with which to wield his putsch. He looked inevitably to Ludendorff but Germany’s war icon again advanced with due care, and would not consent to lead it. Kapp had to settle for General Walther von Lüttwitz, a diminutive and fiery Prussian aged in his early 60s, dubbed the “Father of the Freikorps”. Von Lüttwitz, a commander of some note in the First World War, had been scheming since July 1919 to topple the government.

Von Lüttwitz first met Kapp on 21 August 1919, and realised that the civil servant was not really the man to rule Germany. Once the coup succeeded, the German Army would take over as von Lüttwitz and others had planned. The putsch was to be executed with the Freikorps Marine Brigade, a force of 5,000 troops led by the fanatical Lieutenant-Commander Hermann Ehrhardt. His soldiers had an unforgiving reputation. At different times in 1919, they viciously put down a number of leftist developments in Germany, including the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic.

Ehrhardt’s Marine Brigade was photographed, beginning on 12 March 1920, with swastikas

emblazoned on their helmets and armoured vehicles. It was with the Marine Brigade that the swastika symbol first experienced widespread notoriety, before it was adopted by the Nazi Party a few months later, in the summer of 1920 (8). One could argue these men were among the first Nazis, and indeed many of them became followers of Hitler. A youthful Hitler initially looked favourably on the Kapp Putsch, and he even belatedly flew to Berlin from Munich so as to meet the conspirators. Kapp had arranged Hitler's flight. (9)

Under the Versailles Treaty's conditions, the Freikorps were to be dissolved and the powerful Ehrhardt Brigade was soon up to be axed, on 10 March 1920. On hearing this, a panic-stricken Ehrhardt approached von Lüttwitz, who reassured the younger man by saying, "Don't do anything and keep quiet. I won't permit the troops to be disbanded". The coup was originally expected to take place some time in April 1920 but, mainly because of the above demobilisation order, it was brought back for early or mid-March.

On 9 March 1920, Ludendorff's right-hand man Colonel Bauer went to see Major-General Neill Malcolm, Chief of the British Military Mission to Berlin. Bauer wanted to know if the English, with their ambivalent attitude towards Germany, would acquiesce to their putsch. Bauer remarked to Malcolm that a resurgent Germany "would be a useful counterpoise to France on the continent". Malcolm responded that a military coup in Germany would be "sheer madness" (10). Bauer was unperturbed by this frank encounter, and went away telling everyone that the British government had assured the plotters its friendly neutrality.

Image on the right: Walther von Lüttwitz (centre) and Gustav Noske (right), c. 1920 (CC BY-SA 3.0 de)



On 10 March 1920 **Gustav Noske**, the Weimar Republic's defence minister, became alarmed when he heard that the Ehrhardt Brigade was not dismantled as scheduled. General Hans von Seeckt, the effective leader of the new German Army (the Reichswehr), told Noske that von Lüttwitz had resisted the demobilisation command. Von Seeckt, a



cunning operator, sat on the fence over coming days. It was only late on the 12th of March – within hours of the coup starting – that defence minister Noske discovered by chance the Ehrhardt Brigade was leaving its base at Döberitz, 15 miles from Berlin, and marching on the capital. Noske did his best to nip the coup in the bud, by relaying orders over the telephone, but it was too late.

Noske knew that the German Army would not defend the Weimar Republic against the Freikorps. Von Seeckt informed Noske just before the putsch that German troops do not fire on each other, particularly past comrades in war. To compound matters, Berlin's Security Police were on the side of the rebels too. Noske informed the government hierarchy, President Friedrich Ebert and Chancellor Gustav Bauer, that they would have to flee Berlin post haste, along with the rest of their cabinet colleagues. At 5am they escaped southwards in a fleet of motor cars, travelling to Dresden and then Stuttgart, declaring that city the temporary capital of the Reich.

Ehrhardt and his battalion, armed with rifles and stick grenades, entered Berlin just before dawn at 6am on Saturday the 13th of March. They rested briefly in the Tiergarten park in central Berlin, adjacent to the Unter den Linden boulevard, and less than a kilometre from the Reich Chancellory. The weather was unusually mild and calm. After a few minutes in the Tiergarten, some members of the Ehrhardt Brigade saw Ludendorff, in full military attire, striding down the Unter den Linden. Ludendorff spotted them also, in fact had expected to see them, and he stopped near the Unter den Linden to talk to von Lüttwitz. A flustered Dr Kapp arrived – the ceremonial dictator was suitably dressed for the occasion in morning coat, top hat, striped trousers and spats.

Ludendorff walked over to greet Ehrhardt and his men, who fell into formation. With the clock fast approaching 7am, the Imperial colours of black, white and red were unfurled. A brass band was organised. Goodspeed wrote that,

“Ludendorff, von Lüttwitz and Kapp took up their positions in front of the troops; the brass band struck up Deutschland über Alles; and away they went, goose-stepping through the great arch of the Brandenburger Tor, up Unter den Linden with the Quadriga of Victory looking down on them, and so on to the Government quarter of Berlin”. (11)

With it being a Saturday some Berliners, up early for grocery shopping and entirely unaware of what was unfolding, stared in amazement as Ludendorff and company marched past them. Other residents of Berlin, awakened by the brass band, gazed out of their windows and from balconies. Kapp, von Lüttwitz and Ludendorff went straight to the Reich Chancellory and entered the main door, but found the place deserted; apart from, that is, the presence of the liberal vice-chancellor Eugen Schiffer, who agreed to stay behind as a representative of the legal government.

Lieutenant-Commander Ehrhardt, on learning that the Weimar leaders and ministers were allowed to escape, reacted angrily. He felt, at the least, that they should have been apprehended and thrown in jail. Von Lüttwitz, believing they were merely a rascally bunch of politicians, was content to let them go. Throughout Saturday, the burgeoning Freikorps paramilitary formations surrounded Berlin and took control with ease. War weary Berliners reacted to the coup, for the most part, with indifference or contempt, but large street demonstrations against the conspirators did not unfold. When news spread across Berlin

that Ludendorff was directly involved, and present in the Reich Chancellory, some hundreds of his supporters – monarchists and rightists – gathered outside the building, waving Imperial flags, and hoping to catch a glimpse of him.

The Reich Chancellory was filling up with an assortment of people: From his holiness Gottfried Traub, a Lutheran Pastor and former Court Chaplain to the Kaiser, now to be the Minister of Culture, to Ignaz Trebitsch-Lincoln, jack of all trades and Kapp's Foreign Press Censor. Colonel Bauer and Captain Pabst were there, jovial and enthusiastic.

It was becoming clear, however, that neither Kapp nor von Lüttwitz had the first notion of how to govern. Kapp was having difficulty in finding a typewriter and typewritist, in order to compose his proclamation to the German public. He remembered at last that his daughter had taken a typing course during the war, and summoned her to the Reich Chancellory at once. To his extreme irritation Kapp could not locate the new Press Chief, Hans Schnitzler, and he shouted down the corridor "Where is Schnitzler? I cannot govern without Schnitzler!" (12). Unknown to Kapp, Schnitzler had earlier been refused entry to the Reich Chancellory by the storm-troopers, who did not know him.

Von Lüttwitz, arguing demonstratively into the telephone, was busy dealing with a case of insubordination from his son-in-law, Colonel Kurt von Hammerstein. The Colonel courageously refused to send his troops into Berlin to bolster the coup. General von Seeckt, upon hearing this, commented drily, "How can you expect von Lüttwitz to run the country, when he can't control his own son-in-law?"

Come the following day, Sunday evening, the coup was beginning to crack as the trade unions turned against the dictatorship. In Stuttgart the exiled Weimar government signed a proclamation for a nationwide general strike, which was duly obeyed by the workers in Berlin on Monday the 15th of March. No essential services were exempt and the capital ceased to function. Elsewhere the industrial Ruhr was paralysed. Also on Monday some of the locals, discerning the conspirators' incompetence, were becoming restless and antagonistic. The Freikorps responded with brutality, not for the last time, in opening fire on unarmed civilians. (13)

During Monday evening Kapp was informed that the British High Commissioner, Lord Kilmarnock, said Colonel Bauer's story of British support was "a damned lie". Kapp turned pale on hearing this (14). The putsch in reality could not have succeeded under any circumstances, because the Allies would not have allowed it so shortly after the war's conclusion. It was this factor, and not the general strike as is often claimed, which was truly decisive in the coup's failure. The ink was barely dry on the Versailles Treaty documents. France especially would have relished a chance to march deeper into a weakened Germany's territory.

On Tuesday afternoon, Major-General Malcolm officially outlined to von Lüttwitz that the British government, led by David Lloyd George, would not recognise the Kapp regime. That night, the beleaguered putschists convened in the heavily guarded Reich Chancellory. Since they could think of no action to rescue their coup, they started arguing bitterly among themselves. When it was clear that von Lüttwitz was not going to be present, they blamed all of their problems on him. The recriminations continued until dawn. Bauer, with tears streaming down his cheeks, requested that Ludendorff now lead the putsch. Ehrhardt in particular supported this suggestion, but Ludendorff wisely declined the offer, with thanks.

By the morning of Wednesday the 17th of March, Kapp learnt that the Berlin Security Police had reversed their position and were demanding his resignation. With further unrest breaking out through Germany, the writing was on the wall. Badly losing his nerve, Kapp decided it was time to resign and so ended the putsch that bore his name.

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## Notes

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