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102 Years Ago: Far-right Coup Against Germany's Weimar Republic. The March 1920 Kapp Putsch Against Social Democracy

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Author's Note:

A century ago exactly (12 June 1922) occurred the death from cancer, at age 63, of Dr. Wolfgang Kapp, the far-right German politician and civil servant. Kapp was well-known to Erich Ludendorff, dictator of Germany during World War I, and to a lesser extent Adolf Hitler, dictator of Germany during World War II.

The below article may serve as a timely reminder against extremist tendencies, with neo-Nazism having re-emerged strongly this century in prominent European countries like Germany, France and the Ukraine; and also further afield in powerful states such as America and Brazil.

Over the past century, Kapp's name has been most closely associated with the coup d'état that bears his name and which he nominally led, in mid-March 1920, titled the Kapp Putsch. This attempt, to install a de facto military dictatorship in Berlin, had the strong support of among others General Walther von Lüttwitz, General Ludendorff, Colonel Max Bauer and Lieutenant-Commander Hermann Ehrhardt. In an attempt to join the conspirators, the 30-year-old Corporal Hitler landed in Berlin by airplane 4 days following the implementation of the coup.

After disembarking from his aircraft Hitler, by now an anti-Semite, was reputedly disconcerted and amazed by the presence of the Jewish Hungarian-born Ignaz Trebitsch-Lincoln, Kapp's Foreign Press Censor in the regime. Hitler later recalled having seen Trebitsch-Lincoln, though it is doubtful that they actually spoke to each other; and Trebitsch-Lincoln never made any mention of being in Hitler's company. Trebitsch-Lincoln already had a remarkable and varied career behind him as an evangelical preacher, a German spy and a Liberal Member of Parliament (MP) in Britain.

The fact that someone of Jewish heritage had a central role in the new autocracy in Berlin suggests that Kapp, at any rate, was not particularly anti-Semitic. Military historian Donald J. Goodspeed wrote that, by associating himself with the Kappists, Trebitsch-Lincoln had "at last found men who appreciated his talents".

Once installed in power in the Reich Chancellery, Kapp would by no means prove to be as brutal as other autocrats. When his coup began to flounder after mere days, he refused to let loose the German paramilitary forces (Freikorps) on the people of Berlin. Goodspeed observed of how the putsch unfolded, "The predominance of von Lüttwitz, Ehrhardt, Ludendorff and Colonel Bauer over such weak civilian figures as Kapp and Schnitzler [Kapp's Press Chief] needs no underlining".

Kapp had not, in fact, been raised in Germany. He was born in New York City on 24 July 1858, and spent the first decade of his life in America. His father Friedrich Kapp (1824-1884), born in the town of Hamm in western Germany, was a noted journalist, politician and lawyer who had emigrated to the United States in March 1850. Kapp's mother was Luise Kapp (née Engels, 1825-1916), the daughter of a decorated Prussian general named Friedrich Ludwig Engels, who in the mid-19th century was the military commander of Cologne, one of Germany's biggest cities today.

After 20 years in America, Friedrich Kapp returned to Germany with his family in April 1870. They settled down in Berlin and Wolfgang Kapp, now aged 12, was sent to the secondary school called the Friedrich Wilhelm Gymnasium. This was the same institution in which Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), the famous German chancellor, had received part of his education. Kapp then studied law at the University of Tübingen, in southern Germany, and shortly before graduating he married Margarete Rosenow (1853-1929), who came from a well-connected conservative family and which would have influence on Kapp's political views.

After leaving university, Kapp worked in the German Finance Ministry and the East Prussian Lands Offices. It seems that, during the First World War, Kapp's political outlook became more extreme as the tide gradually turned against Germany. After the war ended in November 1918, he started to mix with those who possessed similar radical thoughts such as Ludendorff and Captain Waldemar Pabst. Together they, and others with them, formulated a plan to re-instore rightist and military control over Germany at the Weimar Republic's expense.

The failure to do so, however, would force Kapp and a number of his close associates to flee Germany in the spring of 1920, though Ludendorff was able to remain in the country. The humiliation surrounding this closing chapter of Kapp's life may have seriously affected his health. In April 1922 Kapp, maybe because he knew he was dying, returned to Germany from Sweden in order to stand trial in Leipzig for his leading part in the coup. Two months later he died in prison before he could enter court, an inglorious end for someone who had dreams of ruling Germany only 2 years before.

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Just over a century ago, on 13 March 1920 a far-right coup d'état was implemented against the nascent Weimar Republic in Berlin, known as the Kapp Putsch, which stood as an early

warning signal for the rise of the Nazi Party.

The Kapp Putsch was an attempt to destroy Social Democratic governance in Germany, and to 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. Partaking in this coup from the outset were some leading German military men, including **General Erich Ludendorff**, one of the major figures in 20th century European history.

Image on the right: Wolfgang Kapp, the leader of the Putsch (Public Domain)

During the First World War, Ludendorff had been the dictator of Germany for a two year period, from the autumn of 1916 until the conclusion of hostilities. In subsequent years Ludendorff was positioned at separate times on the right, but mostly at 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 also strongly criticised the "terrible inroads" and pernicious effects that Roman Catholicism was having on the German people.

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 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 successful transition to the political arena.

At war's end, following a three month exile in the southern Swedish town of Hässleholm, Ludendorff returned to Berlin at the end of February 1919. The 54-year-old general continued to don his World War I 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 effusively. Richard J. Evans, the 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). The Ludendorff biographer, Donald J. Goodspeed, acknowledged that he "commanded considerable respect throughout the country". (2)

In March 1921, General Ludendorff was introduced to the little known extremist politician

Adolf Hitler, when the latter had by then been a Nazi Party member for around a year (3). Ludendorff and Hitler would be on close terms during the mid-1920s. In late 1924 Ludendorff, largely because of his famous 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 became a fully-fledged Nazi Party MP and would remain so until 1928.

By the beginning of the 1930s, Ludendorff was issuing 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 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)

Ludendorff had been possessed with great 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 called him "the guiding genius of the German Army" (6). By early 1920 Ludendorff's ambition, or rather his megalomania, was sky high. Appalled but not surprised by the Treaty of Versailles signed in late June 1919, his aim was to reassume the dictatorship of Germany as soon as possible, restore her lost territories, and thereafter grant his nation the "place in the sun" she deserved.

Ludendorff stated more than once, "The greatest blunder the revolutionaries made was to leave us all alive. If I once get back to power there will be no quarter" (7). For the time being, recognising Germany's unfavourable international position, Ludendorff proceeded with some caution.

The nominal leader of the impending putsch, Dr Kapp, was elected to the Reichstag in January 1919 as a monarchist. In September 1917 he had been a leading founder of the far-right German Fatherland Party (Deutsche Vaterlandspartei). Kapp was a firm backer of Ludendorff's expansionist programs in the war, including the hawkish strategy of unrestricted U-boat attacks. Kapp gained a reputation in Germany of being a civilian who was more militant than the militarists (8). This publicity had so inflated Kapp's sense of his own self-importance, that he truly came to believe he was the man to restore Germany's greatness.

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". (9)

By August 1919 Kapp sought out 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. The National Association received major funding from Hugo Stinnes, the wealthy German industrialist, after he had been persuaded by Ludendorff (10). Stinnes' influence extended beyond the Reich. He would, for example, feature on the front page of the American news magazine,

Time.

Another key member of the National Association was **Captain Waldemar Pabst**, a high-ranking German officer who in following years made contact with Hitler and Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. Pabst gained infamy for ordering the executions of the revolutionary socialists, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, on 15 January 1919 (11). The loss in particular of Luxemburg, one of the most remarkable women in modern times, was a real blow to the socialist movement.

In the opening weeks of 1920 the Freikorps, German paramilitary groups comprising mainly of ex-World War I soldiers, were openly debating a move 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 decorated soldier and Ludendorff's Chief of Operations from 1916 to 1918.

Kapp still required a sword with which to wield his putsch. He looked inevitably to Ludendorff but Germany's former autocrat advanced with due care and would not consent to lead it. Ludendorff, however, allowed the conspirators to convene regularly at his luxuriously furnished apartment in the Victoriastrasse, in the centre of Berlin, which had a view of the Tiergarten park across the street. Among the visitors to see Ludendorff at his apartment were Kapp, Colonel Bauer and Captain Pabst. Ludendorff was kept informed of the coup's organisation and he enjoyed some sway over its development but, while for years he had been one of the best staff officers in Germany, the general left the staff work of the coup to others. (12)

To serve as the military head of his putsch, Kapp had to settle for General Walther von L*ü*ttwitz. He was a diminutive and fiery Prussian aged in his early 60s, dubbed the "Father of the Freikorps". Von L*ü*ttwitz, a commander of some note in the First World War, had been scheming since July 1919 to topple the government.

Image below: Hermann Ehrhardt during the Putsch (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 de)

Von L*ü*ttwitz first met Kapp on 21 August 1919, and he realised that the civil servant was not exactly the man to rule Germany. Once the coup succeeded, the German Army would take over as von L*ü*ttwitz and others had planned. The putsch was to be executed with the Freikorps Marine Brigade, a force of about 5,000 troops led by the fanatical **Lieutenant-Commander Hermann Ehrhardt**. Goodspeed observed that Ehrhardt was "a young, daring and ruthless soldier of fortune" and regarding the unit he led "it would have been hard to find a more formidable body of troops" (13). Ehrhardt's soldiers had an unforgiving reputation. At different times in 1919, they stamped out a number of leftist developments in Germany, including the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic.

The Ehrhardt Brigade was first photographed, in March 1920, with swastikas emblazoned on their helmets and armoured vehicles. It was with the Marine Brigade that the swastika symbol experienced widespread notoriety, before it was then appropriated by the Nazi Party a few months later, in the summer of 1920 (14). 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 belatedly flew to Berlin from Munich to meet the conspirators. Kapp had arranged Hitler's flight. (15)

Under the Versailles Treaty's conditions, the Freikorps were to be dissolved and the Ehrhardt Brigade was first up to be axed, on 10 March 1920. On hearing this, a panic-stricken Ehrhardt approached von L*ü*ttwitz, 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, 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. From the shadows we can see Ludendorff's influence over events. Bauer wanted to know if the English, with an 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 undertaking a coup in Germany would be "sheer madness" (16).

Bauer was unperturbed by this frank encounter, and he went away telling everyone that the British government had assured the plotters its friendly neutrality.

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 German armed forces (the Reichswehr), told Noske that von L*ü*ttwitz had resisted the demobilisation command. Von Seeckt, a cunning operator who was disliked by people like Ludendorff, 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 D*ö*beritz, 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 told 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 5 am on Saturday the 13th of March they escaped southward in a fleet of motor cars, travelling to Dresden and then Stuttgart, declaring that city the temporary capital of the Reich. The government politicians had got out of Berlin just in time.

Ehrhardt and his men, armed with rifles and stick grenades, entered Berlin just before dawn at 6 am on 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 Chancellery. 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 across the park from the direction of Victoriastrasse (17). Ludendorff spotted them also, in fact had expected to see them, and he stopped near the Unter den Linden to talk to von L*ü*ttwitz and Ehrhardt. 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 the Ehrhardt Brigade, which fell into formation. With the clock fast approaching 7 am, the Imperial colours of black, white and red were unfurled. A brass band was organised. Goodspeed wrote, "Ludendorff, von L*ü*ttwitz and Kapp took up their positions in front of the troops; the brass band struck up Deutschland *ü*ber 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". (18)

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 L*ü*ttwitz and Ludendorff went straight to the Reich Chancellery and entered the main door, but they 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.

Demonstration in Berlin against the putsch. The caption reads: “A quarter million participants” (Public Domain)

Lieutenant-Commander Ehrhardt, on learning that the Weimar leadership were allowed to escape, reacted angrily. He felt at the least that they should have been apprehended and thrown in jail. General von L*ü*ttwitz, believing they were merely a rascally bunch of politicians, had been content to let them go and it would prove a serious tactical mistake (19). On this occasion Ehrhardt was right to protest. Throughout Saturday, the Freikorps paramilitary formations surrounded Berlin and took control without a shot fired.

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 Chancellery, 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 Chancellery 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, nevertheless, becoming clear that neither Kapp nor von L*ü*ttwitz had the first notion of how to govern. Kapp was having trouble in finding a typewriter and typist, so as to compose his proclamation to the German public. He remembered at last that his daughter had taken a typing course during the war, and he immediately summoned her to the Reich Chancellery. Even so, Kapp did not complete his manifesto in time for it to feature in the Sunday newspapers. To his extreme irritation Kapp could not locate the new Press Chief, Hans Schnitzler, and he roared down the corridor “Where is Schnitzler? I cannot govern without Schnitzler!” (20). Unknown to Kapp, Schnitzler had earlier been refused entry to the Reich Chancellery by the storm-troopers, who did not know him.

Von L*ü*ttwitz, 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 L*ü*ttwitz to run the country, when he can’t control his own son-in-law?” (21)

Sunday the 14th of March was a beautiful spring day in Berlin. As usual in such weather, crowds thronged the Unter den Linden and many Berliners, temporarily forgetting about the putsch, travelled to Mariendorf in the south of Berlin to watch the horse races. Special buses ran from central Berlin to the race track. By Sunday evening, the coup was beginning to crack as the trade unions turned against the dictatorship. Moreover, Kapp was having difficulty in finding men to accept portfolios, and a number of cabinet posts were in fact never filled (22). 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 (23). 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 when he heard this (24). Ludendorff now personally interceded, urging Kapp to hold his ground while reminding the civil servant that, as Germany’s military ruler during the war, he had been in worse predicaments than this and had survived.

Yet the putsch could really not have succeeded under any circumstances, because the Allies would not have allowed it so shortly after the war’s conclusion. 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 outlined to von L*ü*ttwitz that the British government, led by David Lloyd George, would not recognise the Kapp regime. That night, the beleaguered putschists gathered in the heavily guarded Reich Chancellery. Since they could think of no humane action to rescue their coup, they started arguing bitterly among themselves. When it became clear that von L*ü*ttwitz was not going to be present, they blamed all of their problems on him. Ehrhardt had stated the previous day that, to solve the crises afflicting their regime, they should shoot the trade union leaders and strike pickets, and force the striking workers back to work under threat of the same fate.

Kapp and von L*ü*ttwitz had both rejected Ehrhardt’s demand. To their credit, they were not prepared to unleash the Freikorps on German non-combatants (25). The recriminations in the Reich Chancellery continued until dawn. Bauer, with tears streaming down his cheeks, requested that Ludendorff replace von L*ü*ttwitz. Ehrhardt strongly supported this suggestion, but Ludendorff wisely declined the offer with thanks.

By the morning of Wednesday the 17th of March, Kapp learned 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 in favour of von L*ü*ttwitz, which he did in the early afternoon of Wednesday. Kapp then fled with his daughter by taxi from the Reich Chancellery and drove to the Berlin Tempelhof Airport, where they boarded a plane to Sweden (26). Remarkably, even after Kapp had departed, von L*ü*ttwitz, Ludendorff, Ehrhardt and Bauer continued to insist the coup had not failed and that they were determined to carry on.

The Reichswehr hierarchy, regardless, had decided that the putsch should be brought to an end to avoid a civil war, and to maintain the military command's unity. When told that he must resign, von L*ü*ttwitz did not take the news at all well; his face turned purple, he repeatedly banged the hilt of his sword on the ground and shook his fist, berating the Reichswehr leadership. After these amusing histrionics had passed, von L*ü*ttwitz was compelled to write out his resignation in the early evening of Wednesday. The putsch officially ended at 6 pm on 17 March 1920, lasting in all for less than 5 days (27). Von L*ü*ttwitz after a brief period fled to Hungary.

While it has been claimed that the Kapp Putsch was an unmitigated disaster for the far-right, a closer examination suggests this is not entirely accurate. Had Kapp and von L*ü*ttwitz been able to secure their military dictatorship for a longer period of time, the Allies would have intervened with force of arms into the heart of Germany. In that case the Kappists, men such as von L*ü*ttwitz and Ehrhardt, would undoubtedly have fought back, and they would have suffered a routing, which would have led to their utter discrediting. (28)

As events showed, the fascists had simply suffered a reverse with the Kapp Putsch, which was by no means a fatal check. Even more serious, the Nazis would eventually learn from the Kappists' errors. After the French and British did not decisively interfere in March 1920, the extreme German militarists and politicians rediscovered their composure, and for the next decade and more their ideas flourished darkly in the German soil before bursting forth.

Hours after the Kapp Putsch had disintegrated, Ludendorff shook hands with his former Chief-of-Operations and said, "Bauer, we are the richer for a bitter experience" (29). Berlin was becoming too hot to hold Ludendorff. Only 2 years before, his dominion had stretched across much of continental Europe, now his position in the German capital was again untenable. In late March 1920 Ludendorff went off on another journey, disguising himself by wearing a hat and blue spectacles, while having adopted the rather comical alias of "Herr Lange". The general relocated by train southward to Bavaria, a region which the Weimar Republic could scarcely claim to control. In Bavaria, Ludendorff was granted refuge on the rural estate of Baron von Halkett, near the town of Rosenheim.

Meanwhile by 1933 the international and domestic situation had changed so dramatically, that Hitler was able to grab power for himself early that year. Goodspeed realised, "Worst of all, Hitler and his supporters had learned something from Kapp's failure… once they formed a government they knew how to consolidate their power. There was nothing aimless about them. They had pondered the set-back of 1920 and had drawn the obvious Freikorps conclusion – everything would be all right if only they shot more people". (30)

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Notes

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Featured image: Memorial for the suppression of the Kapp putsch, railway station of Wetter. The sign reads: "For peace, freedom and democracy — in memory of the suppression of the Kapp putsch in March 1920" (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0)
