

# The Rise of Nazism and Terrorist Groups in Interwar Germany

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*The ideology of Nazism came into being in the years after the First World War. Had the conflict not erupted, it is unlikely that Adolf Hitler and his henchmen would have ever risen to prominence.*

The Nazi fervour did not emerge out of thin air following the end of World War I in November 1918. Almost all of the elements of Nazism were present in Germany even prior to the war; but before 1914 those ingredients had been scattered and rather dormant. They did not constitute a solid whole.

German historian Martin Broszat, who grew up during Hitler's reign, wrote that in pre-1914 Germany there had existed "a virulent anti-Semitism, a blood-and-soil ideology, the notion of a master race, the idea of territorial acquisition and settlement in the East". Broszat noted "only the First World War was to cause the decisive seismic shift in the country's political culture. This was the soil in which Nazism was to grow". (1)

In rural Germany before 1914, overall there had been scant political consciousness. With the general mobilisation of German males during World War I, the nation's rural sectors were politically awakened. As Broszat put it, after the fighting was over Germany had "become a mass society" and "Young peasants and land labourers returned with changed personalities, after the war had torn them from the slow-moving pace of provincial life, and had thrown them into the 'wide world' and onto the stage of fateful national developments".

The unrest in interwar German society was much greater than in countries like France and Britain. The Germans had not been victorious in the war, and it was more likely therefore that an extreme right ideology should rise forth in Germany, and not in the so-called Western democracies.

The warning signs were emerging early on, when a far-right military coup d'état was implemented in Berlin during the spring of 1920 [Kapp Putsch, 13–17 March] (2). Leading the Kapp Putsch into Berlin, on the morning of 13 March 1920, was the Marine Brigade of Lieutenant-Commander Hermann Ehrhardt, whose soldiers had served in the German military during the war.

Once Ehrhardt's men marched into Berlin's city centre, they could be seen wearing the ancient swastika symbol in large white print on their helmets and armoured vehicles. Perhaps it can be said that the Marine Brigade, which consisted of between 5,000 to 6,000 men, were among the first true Nazis.

The swastika was displayed by Ehrhardt's Marine Brigade before it was used by Hitler and the new Nazi Party, which had officially been founded on 24 February 1920, a couple of weeks before the Kapp Putsch. The swastika was then adopted by Hitler for the Nazi Party in the summer of 1920. (3)

Aged 38 in 1920, Ehrhardt was an ex-officer in the German Imperial Navy. Ehrhardt had participated in a commanding role, for example, in the Battle of Jutland (31 May–1 June 1916), the largest naval battle of World War I and which forever destroyed the myth of invincibility of the Royal Navy, as over 6,000 British seamen lost their lives in the course of little more than a day.

Ehrhardt was a ruthless, daring and fanatical soldier, which was the case with many of the men under his command. Military author Donald J. Goodspeed wrote of the Marine Brigade, "All in all, it would have been hard to find a more formidable body of troops".

Through 1919, the Marine Brigade had helped to liquidate various leftist developments in Germany, such as in the cities of Dresden and Brunswick. The Marine Brigade assisted further in eliminating the Bavarian Soviet Republic, which was toppled in early May 1919, while they also overcame the groups of Polish fighters who had attacked Upper Silesia. Ehrhardt's unit was part of the paramilitary formations (Freikorps) which were springing up in Germany shortly after the war.

It was at this time, in late February 1919, that General Erich Ludendorff returned to Germany after 3 months voluntary exile in southern Sweden (4). General Ludendorff had ruled Germany through a military autocracy from August 1916 to October 1918, failing narrowly to defeat the larger forces of the Anglo-French-American armies. Lt. Col. Goodspeed, a biographer of Ludendorff, wrote that the general possessed "outstanding military abilities". (5)

The war was over, however, and the 54-year-old Ludendorff had to get on with the rest of his life. He would be a figure of inspiration for the radical German right. Following his return to Berlin from Sweden, Ludendorff, because he was one of the most well-known people in Germany, was given spacious quarters at the Adlon Hotel in central Berlin. The Adlon Hotel was among the best hotels in Europe and was the headquarters of the Allied Disarmament Commission.

Ludendorff informed the English generals staying at the Adlon Hotel that Germany "would never have lost the war if it had not been for the vacillation and weakness of the German Government and people".

The old order in Germany had collapsed, when Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated on 9 November 1918 and left permanently for the Netherlands, ending his 30-year tenure as the German Empire's monarch. A left-leaning government promptly came to power in Germany, which would become known as the Weimar Republic. The German president from 11 February 1919 was Friedrich Ebert, who for many years had been a member of the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) of Germany. Also prominent in the Weimar government was Philipp Scheidemann, the SPD leader.

Through 1919 and beyond Ludendorff said repeatedly of the leftist forces and politicians, "The greatest blunder of the revolutionaries was to leave us all alive. If I once get back to power there will be no quarter. I should hang up Ebert, Scheidemann and their comrades with a clear conscience and watch them dangle!"

As soon as possible, Ludendorff's intention was to reclaim complete power in Germany, and then embark upon a massive war of conquest across Europe. He wanted to re-establish Germany as the dominant nation on the continent and, once that was accomplished, retire in peace.

Ludendorff's megalomania was already pronounced by 1919. In a letter to wife Margarethe during his exile in Sweden, Ludendorff compared himself to Hannibal, the Carthaginian general often considered to be one of history's greatest commanders. Ludendorff wrote to his wife, "Tell everybody how like my fate was to that of Hannibal. That will teach them to understand". Hannibal went into voluntary exile in the year 195 BC, having been forced to do so by the Romans. (6)

Forefront in Ludendorff's mind was the overthrow of the Ebert government. The Adlon Hotel was too conspicuous a place for the sort of work which Ludendorff was thinking of. Later in 1919, some friends proposed to lend him a luxuriously furnished apartment on the Viktoriastrasse (Victoria Street), located opposite the Tiergarten park in the centre of Berlin. He accepted their offer.

Before long, comrades and conspirators were convening in Ludendorff's flat on the Viktoriastrasse, from Dr. Wolfgang Kapp and General Walther von Lüttwitz, to Ludendorff's former Chief-of-Operations Colonel Max Bauer, and Captain Waldemar Pabst. Captain Pabst, who would later be in contact with Hitler and Benito Mussolini, had in January 1919 ordered the executions in Berlin of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the revolutionary socialists.

With Ludendorff's backing, in October 1919 Pabst formed a far-right political organisation called the Nationale Vereinigung, or Bureau of National Union. Its aims were to co-ordinate the anti-Republican forces and to oust the German Republic by a military coup, which would be known as the Kapp Putsch. Involved in the Bureau of National Union was Dr. Kapp, a far-right politician, and General von Lüttwitz, the overall commander of the German paramilitary units.

With the war imprinted on people's minds, including that of the Western Allies, Ludendorff moved carefully in his aim of regaining control of Germany. For the time being he remained somewhat obscured from the centre of events. Goodspeed wrote,

"As Kapp looked about him for a sword he thought first of General Ludendorff himself, who had returned from Sweden, and whose name still commanded considerable respect throughout the country... but in early 1920 he [Ludendorff] still retained enough sense

of reality to proceed with some caution. Although Ludendorff lent the rebel movement his moral support, he declined to lead a putsch". Kapp settled for General von Lüttwitz.

After initially succeeding, the coup would collapse after just 5 days. This was due largely to the lack of ruthlessness and efficiency shown by Kapp and von Lüttwitz in dealing with their adversaries on Berlin's streets, and their leniency to the Weimar politicians, who were allowed to leave Berlin unmolested rather than being apprehended by the Kappists.

Following the Kapp Putsch's fall on 17 March 1920, the conspirators slunk away from the Reich Chancellery and Berlin. Kapp went to Sweden, von Lüttwitz fled to Hungary, while Pabst left for Austria. Ludendorff's involvement in the coup and presence in the Reich Chancellery with the other plotters was not a secret; unlike the ringleaders, Ludendorff held sufficient authority to remain in Germany. Yet he could not stay in Berlin for much longer, as the capital itself had become too hot a place to hold the general.

Before Ludendorff departed Berlin he shook hands with Colonel Max Bauer, a key ally of his during the war, and said, "Bauer, we are the richer for a bitter experience". Bauer then fled to Hungary. In late March 1920 Ludendorff, now going by the name of "Herr Lange", left Berlin by train for the southern German state of Bavaria, a region that would be a hotbed of Nazi activity for years and which the Weimar government could not control.

Lieutenant-Commander Ehrhardt, who had become properly acquainted with Ludendorff during the Kapp Putsch, made his way to join the general in Bavaria. Ernst Pöhner, the anti-communist Bavarian Chief of Police, had invited Ehrhardt and the Marine Brigade to Munich, the capital of Bavaria. Ehrhardt was made the Chief of the Emergency Police, and his troops were given positions as agricultural labourers on the sprawling estates around Munich.

In late 1920 Ehrhardt established a far-right murder society, called the Organisation Consul. It comprised of members of the Marine Brigade, which after the failure of the Kapp Putsch was outlawed by the Ebert government. In a 2 year period, Ehrhardt's Organisation Consul would commit at least 354 political assassinations in Germany. (7)

The Organisation Consul simply killed anybody who Ehrhardt deemed an enemy of Germany. Among the various terrorist associations which hindered the Weimar Republic, the Organisation Consul would be surpassed in notoriety only by the Nazi Party. Very few of the Organisation Consul's members were ever convicted for the murders. (8)

Ludendorff, meanwhile, shortly after relocating to Bavaria, moved to the small village of Ludwigshöhe, beside Munich. Threatened with assassination from communist or left-wing militants, Ludendorff lived in a villa in Ludwigshöhe surrounded by high walls, where he was guarded around the clock by Ehrhardt's men. Ludendorff's daily existence was one of incessant conspiracy, and though he was not personally involved with the Organisation Consul or their killings, Goodspeed pointed out, "These were the people around Ludendorff now and he was, in spirit at least, one of them".

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## Notes

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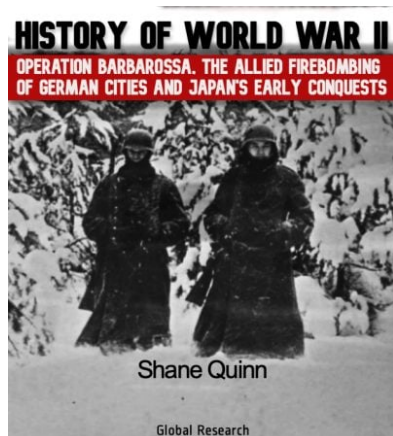
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## History of World War II: Operation Barbarossa, the Allied Firebombing of German Cities and Japan's Early Conquests

By Shane Quinn

*The first two chapters focus on German preparations as they geared up to launch their 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, called **Operation Barbarossa**, which began eight decades ago. It was named after King Frederick Barbarossa, a Prussian emperor who in the 12th century had waged war against the Slavic peoples. Analysed also in the opening two chapters are the Soviet Union's preparations for a conflict with Nazi Germany.*

The remaining chapters focus for the large part on the fighting itself, as the Nazis and their Axis allies, the Romanians and Finns at first, swarmed across Soviet frontiers in the early hours of 22 June 1941. The German-led invasion of the USSR was the largest military offensive in history, consisting of almost four million invading troops. Its outcome would

decide whether the post-World War II landscape comprised of an American-German dominated globe, or an American-Soviet dominated globe. The Nazi-Soviet war was, as a consequence, a crucial event in modern history and its result was felt for decades afterward and, indeed, to the present day.

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