

One hundred years since Germany's Kapp Putsch

How the Social Democratic Party supported the far-right

By Peter Schwarz
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On March 13, 1920, a military putsch shook the one-and-a-half-year-old Weimar Republic. It was led by Gen. Walther von Lüttwitz, the commander of the Reichswehr (German army) in Berlin. During the night, Lüttwitz ordered the Erhardt Brigade, which was notorious for its brutality, into the capital to topple the elected government. Early in the morning, the president and government fled in panic. The putschists subsequently named Wolfgang Kapp, an arch-reactionary representative of the east Prussian landowners, as chancellor of the Reich.

Kapp was able to remain in power for only four days. He was brought down by the biggest general strike ever experienced in Germany. Millions of workers downed tools, brought the country to a standstill, secured weapons and waged bitter battles against counterrevolutionary military units.

The Kapp Putsch is not merely of interest from an historical point of view. At a time when Germany's bourgeoisie is once again turning to militarism, a right-wing extremist party is represented in the federal parliament and all state parliaments, and far-right terrorist networks operate unhindered within the state apparatus and the army, it is of burning contemporary relevance. It destroys the myth that with the founding of the Weimar Republic, the German bourgeoisie turned to democracy and the values of the Enlightenment.

The Kapp Putsch was the result of a conspiracy that involved fascist groups, the Reichswehr and significant sections of the established parties. There are numerous organisational, political, and personal threads of continuity stretching from the bloody suppression of the workers' and soldiers' revolution of 1918-19 to the Kapp Putsch in 1920 and the coming to power of Hitler in January 1933.

This conspiracy was not restricted to the right-wing and conservative parties that explicitly opposed the Republic. The more moderate bourgeois parties, as well as the Social Democratic Party (SPD) were also involved. These parties worked closely with the Reichswehr and fascist Freikorps militias to suppress the struggles of the workers. The SPD, which had been protected by the general strike from the putschists, deployed these very same putschists to suppress the general strike.

After the downfall of the Third Reich, these threads of continuity were not broken. They were merely concealed behind a democratic veneer. The old cliques continued to exist. Numerous state officials, officers, judges, professors and police officers who had either committed capital crimes or were accomplices to such crimes were able to continue their careers unhindered. Today, with German imperialism returning to an aggressive great power foreign policy and with class tensions intensifying, the democratic veneer is peeling off.

Anyone retaining any illusions about the German bourgeoisie's capacity for conspiracy, intrigue and criminality should study the Kapp Putsch and the history of the Weimar Republic.

The Kapp Putsch

The immediate trigger for the Kapp Putsch was Germany's reduction of the Reichswehr from 400,000 to 100,000 soldiers, which it had been obliged to carry out by the June 1919 Versailles Treaty. This included the counterrevolutionary Freikorps, which was formed after the war and integrated into the Reichswehr.

When the SPD-led government under Gustav Bauer, a coalition of the Majority Social Democrats, the Catholic Centre Party and the liberal German Democratic Party (DDP), indicated its intention, under pressure from the allies, to dissolve a number of Freikorps units, including the Erhardt Brigade, Gen. Lüttwitz resisted. After he was fired, he decided to support an uprising and ordered the Erhardt Brigade to march on Berlin.

The putsch had been long prepared and enjoyed broad support within the military. When Reichswehr Minister Gustav Noske (SPD) ordered the highest-ranking general, Hans von Seeckt, to defend the government against the approaching putschists, Seeckt refused the order.

Reichspresident Friedrich Ebert and the government then fled to Dresden, where, with the remark, "Soldiers don't fire on soldiers," they appealed for protection from Gen. Georg Maercker. But he had already received an order by telegram from Berlin telling him to take the members of the government into protective custody. It took much persuading for him not to do so. The flight continued to Stuttgart.

"The conspirators had the sympathy of the big industrialists and large landowners and the explicit support of German nationalist and right-wing Volkish forces," wrote Hans Mommsen. [1] They all opposed the Treaty of Versailles signed by the Bauer government and sought the formation of an authoritarian regime capable of establishing a domestic dictatorship and pursuing an aggressive policy abroad.

Together with Lüttwitz and Kapp, another leading figure in the putsch plans was Capt. Valdemar Pabst, who had ordered the murder of KPD leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in January 1919. "The driving force of the rebel movement was the National Association founded under the patronage of Ludendorff in Berlin in October 1919," wrote Heinrich August Winkler [2]. Alongside Hindenburg, Erich Ludendorff was the most influential German general towards the end of World War I. Two years after the Kapp Putsch, he would lead the Beerhall Putsch in Munich with Adolf Hitler.

Wolfgang Kapp

Kapp also had ties to Hitler. The minister president of East Prussia founded the German Fatherland Party (DVP) in 1917, at a point in the war where support for the conflict began to break down within the SPD and calls for peace without annexations were raised. The DVP's goal was to overturn the class truce with the SPD and trade unions by deploying ruthless military force against protesting workers, strikes and working

class meetings. At the same time, the party used anti-Semitism, nationalism and Volkish ideology in an effort to construct an anti-parliamentary mass movement capable of establishing a dictatorship.

Kapp's party never won mass support and it was dissolved after one year of existence. But it enjoyed strong backing from the military and big business. The leader, alongside Kapp, was Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, while Duke Johann Albrecht zu Mecklenburg served as honorary chairman. A number of leading industrialists were also party members, and they served as a critical source of financial support. These included Max Roetger (formerly of Krupp and later a lobbyist for industry), Carl Duisberg (Bayer AG and IG Farben), Wilhelm von Siemens, Carl Ziese (shipbuilding), Ernst von Borsig (the steel and aluminium industry), Hugo Stinnes (mining and electronics), Emil Kirdorf (coal), Alfred Hugenberg (media), Freiherr von Wangenheim (agriculture and goods trading), Johann Christian Eberle (regional savings banks) and Hermann Röchling (Völklinger Hütte).

One of Kapp's closest associates was Karl Mayer, who recruited Hitler as an informant in the army's intelligence agency, taught him anti-Bolshevik agitation and promoted him as a promising political talent. Hitler, who had founded the largely unknown National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) shortly before the putsch, flew to Berlin three days after the uprising but rapidly turned around when it became clear that the putsch was headed for defeat.

In September 1920, after Kapp had fled to Sweden, Mayer wrote to a friend, "I have mobilised some very capable young people. A Mr. Hitler, for example, has emerged as a powerful force, a public speaker of the first rank. In the Munich regional group we have over 2,000 members, whereas in the summer of 1919 we didn't even have 100." [3]

Support from the government camp

Support for the putschists, or at least a willingness to reach an accommodation with them, stretched deep into the government camp. Hans Mommsen came to the conclusion: "Without the general strike, an authoritarian-style compromise between the groups behind the coup and the parliamentary forces would have been reached." [4]

It is not without historical irony that President Friedrich Ebert and Reichswehr Minister Gustav Noske had to flee into hiding from the putschists. The two Social Democrats had created the monster that was now pursuing them.

In November 1918, workers and soldiers rose up against the Kaiser's regime, the officer corps and the industrial barons. After an initial uprising in Kiel, councils of workers and soldiers spread like wildfire across the country. But instead of forming a new republican guard out of the hundreds of thousands of armed revolutionaries to disarm the old power, Ebert and Noske aligned themselves with the military and mobilised the dregs of society to defend the capitalist system and bloodily suppress the uprising of workers and soldiers.

Noske assumed the role of a bloodhound, ordered right-wing extremist troops to fire on demonstrators, and ordered them to murder Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Putsch leader von Lüttwitz had Ebert and Noske to thank for his post after they appointed him supreme commander of the provisional Reichswehr in Berlin and surrounding areas in 1918. In January 1919, Lüttwitz led the crushing of the Spartacus uprising.

While Ebert and Noske went into hiding from the Kapp putsch, other government representatives remained in Berlin to reach a deal with the putschists. Deputy Chancellor and Justice Minister Eugen Schiffer (DDP) offered them major concessions in the presence of SPD Prussian ministers Wolfgang Heine and Albert Südekum, including the formation of a new coalition government and new elections in the near future.

The national-liberal German People's Party (DVP) of Gustav Stresemann largely backed the putschists and blamed the existing government for having "broken with the path of organic development to

which we subscribe."

General strike

But none of the putschists or their conspirators had reckoned with the reaction of the working class, which responded to the coup with a nationwide general strike. While government representatives ran like cowards for the hills or sought a compromise with the putschists, workers laid down their lives to combat the far-right rebellion. They were not intimidated by heavily armed security forces, which used air bombardments and heavy machine guns against striking workers and shot dozens of unarmed protesters.

The first call for a general strike was issued by government spokesman Ulrich Rauscher (SPD) in the name of Ebert and SPD leader Otto Wels, as the government was fleeing to Dresden. After his arrival in Dresden, Ebert immediately distanced himself from the general strike call, while Chancellor Gustav Bauer described it as a "mystification" for which he bore no responsibility. But the general strike could no longer be stopped. Given the tempo with which the strike spread, it is questionable whether Rauscher's appeal played any role.

In spite of the bitter political struggles of the previous period, members of the SPD, the Independent Social Democrats (USPD), the German Communist Party (KPD) and Christian and anarchist tendencies fought side-by-side against the far-right danger. "The strikers viewed the Kapp Putsch as a symptom of the revolution's failure to destroy the anti-republican apparatuses in the military and state bureaucracy," wrote Mommsen. [5]

This compelled the General German Trade Union Federation (ADGB) and its conservative SPD leader Carl Legien to back the general strike. "The widespread solidarity, which included Christian and liberal groups, compelled the ADGB to abandon its habitual restraint so as not to lose all credibility in the eyes of the workers," remarked Mommsen.

An impression of how bitter the battles in certain regions were is provided by the recollections of Oskar Hippe, a founding member of the Spartacus League and KPD, and a leading figure in the German Trotskyist movement, who was an industrial worker in Halle-Merseburg when the putsch took place.

In the early afternoon of March 13, 1920, he heard news that the government had been overthrown and Freikorps and Reichswehr units were marching into Berlin. That evening, works councillors from the USPD and KPD under the leadership of a "comrade Scheibner" met to decide what was to be done. Many of those present were of the opinion that the Majority Social Democrats were now receiving their comeuppance for their betrayals. But the majority was of the opinion that the issue now posed was to repel the generals' putsch, which was directed against the entire working class.

The decision to call a strike was taken that evening. During the night, comrades and colleagues from the trade unions, joined by works councillors, went into the factories to organise the action.

Hippe detailed how workers combatted and disarmed military units that had sided with the putschists:

I was in a unit with my brother-in-law. Some 15,000 workers surrounded the barracks. We only had a few weapons—a few carbines and hunting rifles we had confiscated from farmers, but nothing apart from that. The call by the combat leaders for the assembled soldiers to lay down their arms was rejected by the battalion's officers. They gave up only after we cut off their water and the combat leaders assured them that they could withdraw without arms...

Four units were armed with the weapons seized at Merseburg. Young workers who had learned how to handle weapons during the war were involved. Our unit was largely made up of workers from

the mines “Cecilie,” “Elisabeth” and “Leonhard,” who knew each other well. ... (from the barracks) we were shot at with 7.5 centimetre shells, and our losses were heavy. A comrade in the Young Communist Association who worked in the “Cecilie” mine was severely wounded next to me. Shrapnel from a grenade tore off part of his chin. [6]

The bloodiest combat occurred in the Ruhr region. The general strike was observed most strictly in the steel plants and coal mines in this area. And it quickly developed into an uprising. The workers armed themselves to drive out the Reichswehr and Freikorps. A “Red Ruhr Army” that inflicted heavy losses on the putschists attracted around 50,000 members. The Red Ruhr Army had no central leadership or political perspective. Syndicalists, communists, Independent Social Democrats and even some Social Democrats exerted political influence on it.

A return to “order”

The general strike isolated the putschists. There was no rail travel, no telephones, no postal service and no newspapers. Major factories were shut down and even water, gas and electricity were cut off in the capital. Although the majority of the military leadership sympathised with Kapp, it adopted a wait-and-see approach due to the uncertainty of the outcome. Senior state officials were reluctant to submit to the new head of government.

On March 17, 1920, Kapp fled in a biplane to Sweden. Lüttwitz assumed control of the government as a military dictator. But he resigned in the evening after Justice Minister Schiffer offered him amnesty. He left the Reich chancellor’s office accompanied by Ludendorff. The Erhardt Brigade also withdrew from Berlin, carrying out another bloody massacre on demonstrators as it left.

The old government returned to power, but the striking workers were not satisfied. They sought guarantees that the counterrevolutionary military and bureaucratic apparatuses would be dismantled.

To bring about an end to the general strike, ADGB leader Legien presented the government with a nine-point plan. It demanded the resignation of Reichswehr Minister Noske, the dissolution of the units that had sympathised with the putsch, the punishment of the putschists, the formation of republican guard units, the implementation of sweeping social reforms, the nationalisation of the coal mines and the formation of a “workers’ government,” which in reality meant the participation of the trade unions in government.

Legien’s initiative was, according to Mommsen, “exclusively tactical and motivated by the desire not to allow the strike to drift under the control of left-wing radicals.” The government made a handful of non-committal promises and the trade union-led strike committee called for an end to the general strike on March 20. However, many strikers refused to follow the call.

The hated Noske resigned on March 20, and he was followed on March 26 by Bauer’s entire cabinet. A new coalition made up of the same parties was formed, with Hermann Müller as chancellor. Müller appointed Hans von Seeckt, the same general who had refused to defend the government against the Kapp Putsch, as head of the armed forces. Seeckt was given the task of bloodily suppressing the workers who had refused to follow the trade unions’ call to end the strike. Over subsequent years, he would oversee a series of bloody massacres of revolutionary workers and transform the Reichswehr into an uncontrollable “state within the state.”

In place of Noske, responsibility for the Reichswehr in the new cabinet fell to the DDP’s Otto Geßler. He remained in this position under various chancellors for eight years, serving as a fig leaf for Seeckt, who dismissed Geßler as a “mere civilian.”

The dismantling of the Red Ruhr Army

The most sustained resistance to the ending of the general strike came from the Red Ruhr Army. It continued to drive the Reichswehr and Freikorps out of the Ruhr region. An officer who fled from Duisburg later reported, “Even war-hardened officers had never experienced anything like it. The troops were constantly fired on from houses and cellars, from dumps and behind tree trunks, even from boiler rooms and power plants.”

The government sent a Social Democrat to split the movement before resorting to all-out violence. The Reich commissioner for the Ruhr Region and subsequent interior minister of Prussia, Carl Severing, agreed a deal with the workers’ parties in Bielefeld on March 24, which the government in Berlin accepted merely for show. It compelled the armed workers to give up their weapons under the joint supervision of enforcement commissioners and the municipal authorities. While the moderate elements agreed to this, more radical forces continued the struggle.

Oskar Hippe reported on the impact of the Bielefeld agreement:

In the meantime, we received a report that an agreement had been reached in Bielefeld in which the government committed to hand the putschists over to the courts and give the workers, through the trade unions, decisive influence over economic and social policy. But the precondition for this was the ending of the general strike.

In the leadership of the fighting units, as well as in the political committee of the KPD and USPD, in which works councillors were represented, discussions were held on whether to bow to the Bielefeld agreement or continue the struggle to a victorious conclusion. The political committee, which was dominated by the USPD with a huge majority, decided to accept the agreement.

In the leadership of the fighting units, opinions were divided. Ninety percent of the workers at the front declared that they were not prepared to lay down their arms and return to the mines disarmed. But the USPD imposed its standpoint: the government would, after all, not break its word. KPD representatives left the meeting in protest and told the workers at the front and assemblies in the mining region that they had been unable to prevail with their arguments in the political committee. [7]

As soon as the radical elements were isolated, the government and von Seeckt deployed the very same Reichswehr and Freikorps units against them that had aligned with Kapp and Lüttwitz. They took bloody revenge. Mass shootings and extra-legal court proceedings repeatedly took place. The exact number of deaths was never counted. According to Winkler, the deaths were “well over 1,000 among the Ruhr miners, 208 killed and 123 missing among the Reichswehr, and 41 killed from the security police.” [8]

While the workers who had put their lives on the line to block the putsch were persecuted, severely punished and even killed, the putschists were largely left unharmed. An amnesty law of August 2, 1920 cleared all putschists of any criminal wrongdoing, provided they had not acted “barbarically” or out of “self-interest.” The Freikorps officers who backed the putsch were integrated into the Reichswehr. With a few exceptions, the proceedings against Reichswehr members involved in the putsch were either terminated or ended in acquittal.

Leading participants in the putsch fled to Bavaria, where the Upper Bavarian district president, Ritter von Kahr, had also launched a coup on March 14, 1920 to force the SPD state government to resign. Bavaria subsequently emerged as a hotbed of right-wing and far-right forces that nourished Hitler’s NSDAP.

Hermann Erhardt, the leader of the brigade which bore his name, then

founded the Organisation Consul in Munich, a paramilitary terrorist organisation that included 5,000 members and was tolerated by Munich police chief Ernst Pöhner without protest. The Organisation Consul was responsible for a number of murders, including that of the Centre Party politician Matthias Erzberger in 1921 and German Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau in 1922. It played a critical role in training Hitler's SA.

Wolfgang Kapp, who had fled to Sweden, ultimately turned himself over to the Reich Court but died prior to the beginning of proceedings. The only putsch participant sentenced to prison was the Berlin police president, Traugott von Jagow, who received the minimum sentence of five years. The court granted him mitigating circumstances because he had "followed Kapp's appeal under the spell of selfless love for the fatherland at a seductive moment."

The social promises made by the government to the strikers were never implemented. Although a commission on social policy was initiated, it was toothless.

A chain of counterrevolutionary shifts

In an article written shortly after Hitler's appointment as German chancellor, Leon Trotsky described the history of the Weimar Republic as a "chain of counterrevolutionary shifts":

The November Revolution, which gave the power to the workers' and peasants' soviets, was proletarian in its fundamental tendencies. But the party that stood at the head of the proletariat returned the power to the bourgeoisie. In this sense the Social Democracy opened the era of counterrevolution before the revolution could bring its work to completion. However, so long as the bourgeoisie depended upon the Social Democracy, and consequently upon the workers, the regime retained elements of compromise. All the same, the international and the internal situation of German capitalism left no more room for concessions. As Social Democracy saved the bourgeoisie from the proletarian revolution, fascism came in its turn to liberate the bourgeoisie from the Social Democracy. Hitler's coup is only the final link in the chain of counterrevolutionary shifts. [9]

The Kapp Putsch and the subsequent suppression of the general strike was a critical link in this chain. The federal election that followed soon afterwards on June 6 produced a shift to the right within the bourgeois camp, with the right-wing liberal German People's Party (DVP) and the national conservative German National People's Party (DNVP) picking up support at the expense of the DDP.

By contrast, the working class moved to the left. The SPD's vote dropped by 16 percent, leaving it, at 21.3 percent, just ahead of the USPD, which increased its share from 7.6 percent to 17.9 percent. The KPD, which was standing in the election for the first time, won 1.7 percent. In the following year, the majority of the USPD joined the KPD, resulting in a rise in the party's membership from 78,000 to 450,000.

But the more the working class was radicalised, the more the SPD and bourgeois parties intensified their conspiracy. In March 1921, President Ebert imposed a state of emergency on Saxony to suppress a general strike in the industrial areas of central Germany. Von Seeckt's troops provided a critical service. They fired on occupied factories with artillery, killing some 150 workers. Six thousand strikers were arrested, with 4,000 sentenced to a total of 2,000 years in prison. Four were sentenced to death.

In 1923, when the French occupation of the Ruhr and rapidly accelerating inflation produced a revolutionary crisis, Ebert handed all executive powers in the Reich to General von Seeckt. He violently dispersed the governments of Saxony and Thuringia, which were both

made up of coalitions between the SPD and KPD, persecuted revolutionary workers and violently crushed the uprising in Hamburg. A victorious socialist revolution was possible in 1923, but it failed because the KPD called off a planned revolutionary uprising at the last minute. Von Seeckt's ruthless crackdown on workers emboldened Hitler, who launched his fascist coup in Munich on November 8 and 9.

As Trotsky correctly remarked, a direct line led from these events to the coming to power of Hitler in 1933. The SPD, which had nourished and supported the forces that brought Hitler to power, was then no longer required and was banned.

The SPD has learned nothing from this experience. The party's foundation is named after Ebert, as well as numerous streets and squares in German cities. The SPD has severed any connections it once had to the working class and is now indistinguishable from the other bourgeois parties. In a seven-year coalition with the Greens and an 11-year coalition with the Christian Democrats and Christian Social Union, the SPD has spearheaded the gutting of social spending, promoted militarism and paved the way for the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany.

In the face of mounting class tensions and rising international divisions, the ruling elite is once again preparing dictatorial forms of rule. The chain of counterrevolutionary shifts can be broken only by the establishment of an international socialist party of the working class based on the historical lessons of the struggles of the past century. That party is the International Committee of the Fourth International and its national sections, the Socialist Equality parties.

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Notes:

[1] Hans Mommsen, *Aufstieg und Untergang der Weimarer Republik*, Ullstein 2004, p. 112

[2] Heinrich Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, Vol 1, München 2002, p. 409

[3] Cited according to Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889 – 1936*, Stuttgart 1998, p. 166

[4] Hans Mommsen, op.cit., pp. 111–112

[5] Ibid., p. 113

[6] Oskar Hippe, *... und unsere Fahne ist rot*, Hamburg 1979, pp. 45–46

[7] Oskar Hippe, op.cit., p. 47

[8] Heinrich Winkler, op.cit., p. 414

[9] Leon Trotsky, *Portrait des Nationalsozialismus*, Essen 1999, pp. 303–304

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