

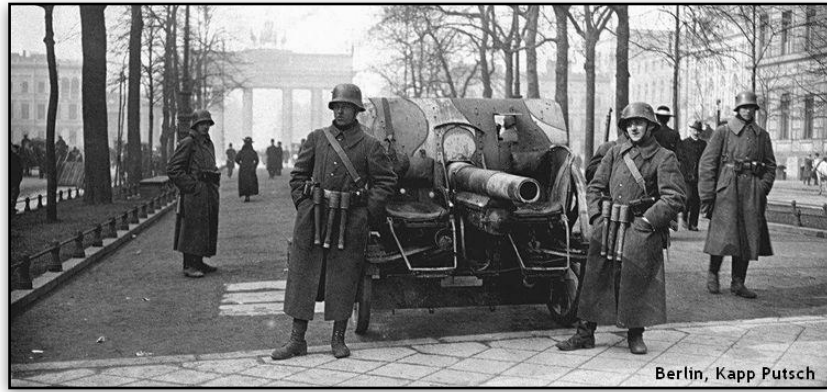
# March 1920, Germany: Military Coup and the Strike that Stopped the Generals

The Facebook Diaries (II)  
By Bernd Hendricks

**Saturday, March 12, 1920.**

Berlin is full with rumors. There is talk of troop movements and of generals who want to order an attack against Berlin. It is said, not far from here at the military training ground in Döberitz, west of Spandau, officers have started to hand out weapons, ammunition, and handgranates to soldiers. The brigade of captain Hermann Ehrhardt is ready for service, but not for this government anymore. For them the government has back-stabbed the generals since it shows more loyalty to the victors of the war than to its own military. Just a year ago, the military under general Walther von Lüttwitz crushed the strike of the workers of Berlin and with it all dreams of socializing big industrie and the idea of workers' councils that wanted to govern the country. What's left is the republik, free elections, a coalition government of social democrats and conservatives and the obligation of the peace treaty of Versailles to reduce the army from 400.000 men to 100.000. At the street corners, people snatch the evening papers from the hands of the newspaper boys. A coup is imminent, they write. Late at night, war minister Gustav Noske convenes the army commanders of the Reichswehr and demands the protection of the republic. Silence. Eventually, supreme commander Hans von Seeckt shrugs: "Troops do not shoot at troops." Noske is shocked, he can not believe it. These people were his friends.

At that time, the soldiers of the Ehrhardt brigade have already left their bases, marching towards the capital. The coup is on. The men are merry and confident of victory. They sing a song: "Beat the Jews to death". On their tanks and on their helmets they have painted a symbol which the Berliner will see for the first time at dawn when the putschists enter the government area around the Reichstag. It is a new symbol: a cross with each arm bend at a right angle. It's called a swastika.



Putschists have arrived in Berlin.

### **Sunday, March 13, 1920.**

The coup is here.

5.000 soldiers of the Ehrhardt brigade approach the city in the night with the order to occupy the parliament, the chancellery on Wilhelmstraße and the ministries.

**4 am:** President Friedrich Ebert calls chancellor Gustav Bauer (SPD) and the ministers for an emergency meeting. The men are nervous and scream at each other. Time is running out, they need to flee. At the last minute, the press secretary writes an appeal to the working people: “A military coup is happening ... General strike on all fronts!”

**6:15 am:** The social-democratic ministers run to their limousines. The conservative member of the cabinet stay. They have nothing to worry about.

**6:30 am:** The soldiers march through the Brandenburg Gate, awaited by the new rulers: General von Lüttwitz and Wolfgang Kapp, landowner, high government official, member of the directorate of the Deutsche Bank and member of the far-right group “Nationale Vereinigung.” Their first decision: The parliament is suspended.

**11:00 am:** People gather in front of print shops and read the strike appeal that has left the printing press.

**12:00 pm:** In Berlin, the first workers leave the workplaces. Kapp dictates an order for the army to shoot everyone who strikes. The order does not go very far. The telegraphs do not work, the telephones are silent. Strikers have cut the lines. Kapp sends messengers but they do not return. That does not matter. The fastest message of the putschists is still the bullet. When a crowd tries to prevent the

guards regiment to occupy the city hall in Schöneberg, soldiers open fire: Seven people die.

**Afternoon:** The SPD ministers and president Ebert reach Dresden. Because they do not get protection by the local army, they continue their escape towards Stuttgart.

On the roof of the barracks in the west of Germany, the military takes down the flag of the republic and flies the flag of the Kaiser instead. The evening paper Rheinisch-Westfälische Zeitung in Essen jubilates: “Brave men have acted in Berlin.” They exercise violence, that is true, but “violence out of patriotism.”

Just wait. Tomorrow is a new day, and tomorrow we will see the finest hour of the labor movement. Tomorrow, the people will show how to deal with fascists.

### **Monday, March 14, 1920.**

The republic does not exist anymore but a general strike is about to save it. Yesterday morning, Soldiers and officers with swastikas on their helmets and canons in their marching column occupied the government district prompting the social-democratic ministers to flee. The night was quiet, and thus the putschists are hoping to consolidate their power during the day. But since dawn, a giant has been rising, and its heroic act begins. Until now, trade unions and the parties of the labor movement (SPD, USPD, KPD) have been locked in conflict, but now they take action together. Their call for a general strike has been followed, and at noon the giant stands tall. From Kiel in the north to Munich in the south, from the Ruhr Valley in the west to the estates in East Prussia — the factories: silent. Fields and barns: abandoned. Stores: closed. No trains, no tram. In the power stations, workers have turned off electricity. No water, no gas, no newspapers except those of the labor movement. Civil servants and white color workers have left the offices. In Berlin, thousands are surrounding the government area. Nothing gets in, nothing gets out. The dictators meet at candle light. Now, as historians estimate, 12 million people are on strike. The people form action committees and workers' councils. When you strike you learn to govern.

In the morning, workers in Bochum have stopped a train from Münster marked as transporting milk. Instead, they found ammunition and 2.050 rifles for the police. The workers arm themselves, the police flee.

In the Ruhr Valley: Call for forming the Red Ruhr Army. Everyone can join who is a member of one of the workers parties or the union for at least a year and

has fought in the war for at least six months. In the next couple of days, 10.000 people will be armed. People's meeting in Bochum. The police commissioner reports to his superiors, that "the crowd has at least 4.000 rifles, 20 machine guns, and 600 hand granates." By late night, the Red Ruhr Arm controls the eastern part of the Ruhr Valley. However, the Reichswehr has begun to bring troops into the region. First shootings at train stations, first fire fights in the streets of Hamborn, Essen, Kamen, Velbert. Meanwhile, the conservative ministers in Berlin have reached out to the putschists. They negotiate. The coup will be without success, they argue. But the putschists know, the decision about succes or failure will not be made in the government area in Berlin. If they want to establish a fascist military dictatorship they have to put down the general strike.

### **Tuesday, March 15, 1920.**

The military dictatorship of general Lüttwitz and banker Kapp is 48 hours old and for the last 25 hours it has been slowly suffocated by 12 million striking white and blue collar workers and civil servants. In Berlin the military is already paralyzed, but it can still move and act in the rest of the country. Lieutenant general Oskar von Watter has moved his troops around the Ruhr Valley facing up to now 50.000 armed workers who are ready to defend the republic. The people do not wait, they go on the offensive. The Freikorps Lichtschlag, a unit of captain Hasenclever known for its brutality, has positioned itself at the train station of Wetter, a small coal miner town near Dortmund. Behind a barricade a worker shouts, "On what side are you?" The captain replies, "On the side of lieutenant general von Watter." "And he?" "On the side of general Lüttwitz." Silence follows, then shots; the attack begins. After some hours of battle, the soldiers run away leaving 64 dead behind, one of them captain Hasenclever. The workers lost seven of their own.

The military flees Düsseldorf, Mülheim, Duisburg, Hamborn, Dinslaken. Fighting in the east: Workers, supported by policemen, occupy the city hall of Gotha, but leave after being shelled by the military. However, worker militias from the surrounding area approach. 46 die in the ensuing combat. In Gera, Workers storm the city hall. Fighting in the Harz mountains. Mass assembly in Halle. The city has been surrounded by troops, then shelled; 106 people die for the republic. Workers arm themselves in Chemnitz. Thousands demonstrate in Leipzig. The military shoots into the crowd: 15 dead. Rostock: People disarm

1.000 soldiers. Fighting in the south: In Nürnberg, 22 people die in an attack of the putschists. In Hanau, railroad workers route troop carriers in the wrong direction. They were heading to the Ruhr Valley, now they end up somewhere in Bavaria.

In Berlin, the putschists are finished. Banker Kapp has disappeared, general Lüttwitz wants to go home. He negotiates with the conservatives the handover of power to the previous government. The negotiators hope the people would end the general strike when the social-democratic ministers would return. They hope in vain.



Workers of the Red Ruhr Army patrol in Oberhausen.

### **Wednesday, Thursday, March 16 and 17, 1920.**

The coup has collapsed. Wolfgang Kapp, owner of great estates, banker, and for the last three days Germany's dictator, has fled to Sweden. General Lüttwitz went to Hungary after the vize chancellor of the old government, Eugen Schiffer, gave him a false passport. Schiffer's colleagues, the social-democratic ministers are on their way back to Berlin from Stuttgart. Before, they have appointed general von Seeckt as the new chief of the Reichswehr, the same man who last week refused to protect the government. Now, in his new role, he protects the putschists: Captain Ehrhardt can pull out his troops from the government area. At

the Brandenburg gate they meet a huge crowd. When the people start booing and cursing and scolding, the putschists take the rifles off the shoulders and shoot. 12 people lie dead on the Pariser Platz. The soldiers continue to march back to their barracks.

The legitimate government arrives in the capital. They expect that the workers end the general strike since the republic has been saved. But nothing moves. The unions demand a new government made up of all labor parties, the dismissal of the hated war minister Noske (SPD), the punishment of the putschists, socialisation of big industries, more participation for the unions in social legislation. The government squirms. As a sign of good will, the unions call for the end of the strike on March 22. However, president Ebert (SPD) refuses to form a workers' government. He only fires his friend Noske, with a heavy heart as he says. That is all. When the workers in the Ruhr Valley refuse to lay down their weapons, when they demand guaranties for the protection of the republic, the government makes a decision of cataclysmic proportions, a decision that has no rival in the history of human betrayal: The government decides to break the will of the people who have saved them, with violence, and to exercise this violence they authorize those who tried to topple them a few days earlier. The putschists from yesterday leave the barracks again, and with an army of 37.000 men, with artillery, tanks, flame throwers, and airplanes, and with the burning desire for blood and revenge, they march on the hotbed of resistance, the Ruhr Valley.

### **End of March, early April 1920.**

The government in Berlin looks back at the coup as if democracy just had a hiccup that can be forgotten. The army, they say, has "returned to the constitution." Now, the people who had defended the republic need to lay down their weapons. The days of triumph are followed by weeks of infamy, in the industrial areas as in little towns. Take Köpenick near Berlin: During the days of the coup, the engineer, councilman, and chairman of the local independent socialist party (USPD), Alexander Kutran, had organized the militia with 1.000 armed citizens of all parties and social classes. They built barricades, guarded the city gates and the city hall. Thousands came to the people's assemblies at the Wilhelm-Platz (today Kutran-Platz) to hear about the general strike in the country. Then news from Berlin: The putschists are defeated. The Köpenickers feel relief. Kutran dissolves the militia. On March 21, four days after the end of the coup, a

company of a rifleman battalion enters the town, and because they are government troops, Kutran abstains from any fighting. The soldiers wearing swastikas on their helmets follow now the man they wanted to remove from power a few days earlier. President Friedrich Ebert (SPD) who is celebrated in the history books as the “father of German democracy” has declared martial law. Everyone who has been found with a weapon needs to be executed. Kutran is asked to come to the city hall for questioning. He goes because he has done nothing to be ashamed of. He will not return home. The soldiers murder him and three of his friends in the yard of the local brewery.

And so, the terror arrives in the Ruhr Valley as well. The army steamrolls through the region with artillery and court-martial as if they are rehearsing for their great future in 20 years when they will commit the holocaust throughout Europe. In the city of Hamm: Mass execution of 49 workers. While working on a bridge in Haltern, 65 construction workers flee from the fighting to a nearby shed. Cheering soldiers throw handgranates into the building. Nobody survives. Pelkum nearby Dortmund: Soldiers execute 90 people, among them nurses of the red cross, and bury them in a mass grave. The killing spree takes 10 days, then there will be silence. Nobody counts the Ruhr Valley’s dead. Historians estimate between 1.200 and 2.000 victims.

Meanwhile, the government has opened investigations against 540 officers who participated in the coup but no one will ever be indicted. Five years later, the government pardons the coup plotter general Lüttwitz. He returns to Germany and will enjoy his retirement with a monthly pension of 18.000 Reichsmark.

The country will never rise again against fascism. When in January 1933, the next president, Paul von Hindenburg, appoints Hitler as chancellor, the labor movement is divided, its leaders have already fled underground. The unions will wait and hesitate until the nazis occupy the union houses and offices in a surprise attack on May 2, 1933. Then, the unions too, will not exist anymore.