

Five Days in March: The Kapp Putsch, Hour by Hour

In the early hours of the 13th March 1920, five thousand men marched through the dark along the road from Döberitz towards Berlin. They moved in good order, as you would expect, because they were among the best soldiers Germany had left. They were the Marinebrigade Ehrhardt, veterans of the Baltic fighting, many of them naval personnel before that, and they had painted swastikas and death's heads on their steel helmets. By dawn they were at the Brandenburg Gate. By breakfast, the German government had lost its capital.

What followed was one of the strangest episodes in modern European history: a coup that succeeded completely in a single morning and then died of suffocation in five days, defeated not by an army, but by typists, bank clerks and tram drivers. It is farce and tragedy so tightly braided together that you cannot pull them apart, and it decided more about Germany's future than almost any event between the armistice and the Depression.

Here is how it happened, blow by blow.

The republic and its hired guns

To understand the events of March 1920 you have to understand the trap the republic had built for itself.

When revolution broke out in 1918 and the old army dissolved, the new government had no reliable force to defend it, so it hired one. The Freikorps, volunteer units of demobilised soldiers, were raised with government money and government blessing to crush the Spartacist rising, fight the border wars in the east, and hold the streets. They did it with enthusiasm and considerable cruelty, and most of them despised the republic that paid them. The government knew this. It employed them anyway, because the alternative was to have no military capability at all.

Then came Versailles. The treaty cut the German army to one hundred thousand men and required the Freikorps to be disbanded, and in early 1920 the bill fell due. Among the units ordered to dissolve was the Marinebrigade Ehrhardt, quartered at the Döberitz camp west of Berlin: superbly disciplined, fanatically loyal to its commander, Korvettenkapitän Hermann Ehrhardt, and loyal to absolutely nothing else. The brigade made its feelings known. At a parade in early March, with senior officers in attendance, it celebrated its own refusal to die. The question was whether anyone would dare act on that refusal.

Three men decided the answer was yes.

The general, the bureaucrat and the fixer

The soldier was General Walther Freiherr von Lüttwitz, commander of the troops in and around Berlin and the most senior general in northern Germany, a Prussian of the oldest school who had never accepted the republic as anything but a regrettable interlude. The civilian was Wolfgang Kapp, a sixty-one-year-old East Prussian official

and co-founder of the wartime Fatherland Party, a man of deep conviction and no discernible political talent whatsoever. And in the background moved the fixer, Captain Waldemar Pabst, who had organised the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht the year before and now organised this, stitching together the circle of officers, officials and nationalists who met as the so-called National Association. Ludendorff, the wartime warlord, hovered at the edge of the plot in the way he hovered at the edge of every plot in these years, close enough to profit, far enough to deny.

The trigger was the dissolution order. On the 10th March, Lüttwitz went to see President Ebert and Defence Minister Noske and delivered what amounted to an ultimatum: the order against the Ehrhardt Brigade must be withdrawn, the National Assembly dissolved, new elections held. It was the demand of a man who believed the army commanded the state rather than the other way round. Ebert refused. Noske relieved Lüttwitz of his command and, for good measure, arrest warrants were drawn up against Kapp, Pabst and the other conspirators.

The warrants were never served. The plotters were warned, almost certainly from inside the security apparatus itself, which tells you a good deal about that apparatus. And Lüttwitz, although dismissed, did not go home. He drove to Döberitz and asked Ehrhardt whether the brigade could take Berlin. Ehrhardt replied that he needed a day to prepare, and that he would be at the Brandenburg Gate by six on Saturday morning.

The night of the 12th March

Word of the march reached the government late on Friday evening, and at one in the morning Noske convened the senior commanders of the Reichswehr at the Bendlerblock to organise the capital's defence. What happened in that room decided everything, and it took only minutes.

Noske asked the generals to deploy the army against the approaching brigade. Almost to a man, they refused. The decisive voice was General Hans von Seeckt, the brilliant, monocled head of the Truppenamt, the disguised general staff, who declared that there could be no question of setting Reichswehr against Reichswehr. Troops, he said, do not fire on troops. Of the officers present, effectively only General Reinhardt, the army's commander-in-chief, was prepared to fight for the government he served. He was overruled by the simple fact that nobody would obey him. Noske, the republic's strongman, who had never flinched from turning guns on workers, discovered at one in the morning that he could not turn them on soldiers. Witnesses describe him close to despair. The army would not defend the putsch. It would not oppose it. It would wait, with professional detachment, to see who won.

At around six that morning, with the brigade's marching column almost in sight of the city, the cabinet took the only decision left to it and ran. Ministers were driven south at speed, first to Dresden, where the local commander proved no more reliable than the generals in Berlin, and then on to Stuttgart. It looked like ignominy. It turned out

to be the shrewdest move of the week, because a government in Stuttgart could not be arrested, and a government that cannot be arrested can't be replaced.

One man stayed behind: Vice-Chancellor Eugen Schiffer, who remained in Berlin to keep a channel open to the putschists and, as it proved, to help organise the quiet strangulation of their regime.

Saturday the 13th: an empire by lunchtime

The brigade came through the Brandenburg Gate in the grey of early morning, banners up, band playing, swastikas, etc on the helmets, and met no resistance whatsoever. Ludendorff happened, by the purest chance, he later insisted, to be taking a morning stroll nearby, in uniform, and fell in to review the troops. By mid-morning the government quarter was occupied, Kapp had proclaimed himself Chancellor and Lüttwitz had appointed himself to command the armed forces. The republic, declared the new regime, was finished. The capital was theirs. Not a shot had been fired.

And then, almost at once, the machinery began to jam.

The first proclamation of the new government was delayed for hours because no typist at the Chancellery would type it; in the end, so the story goes, Kapp's own daughter did the work. It hardly mattered, because when the text was ready there was scarcely anyone to print it. For as the putschists were settling into their ministries, the deposed government's answer was already spreading through the city. Before fleeing, officials in the government's circle had drafted a proclamation in the name of President Ebert and the Social Democratic ministers, and the trade unions under Carl Legien took it up with their full weight. It called for a general strike against the putsch, and it was answered on a scale with no precedent in German history. By Monday, something like twelve million people had stopped work. It remains the largest strike Germany has ever seen.

Berlin simply switched off. No trains, no trams, no buses. No gas, no water, no electricity. No newspapers, which meant the new government of Germany could not even tell Germany it existed. Ministries stood silent because the civil servants, a famously obedient species, declined to recognise their new masters; Schiffer and the senior officials coordinated a passive resistance of exquisite correctness, in which nothing was refused outright but nothing was ever actually done.

The putsch's masterpiece of humiliation came at the Reichsbank. The regime needed money, and the state's own vaults were full of it, so a demand was presented for ten million marks. The bank examined the paperwork and noted, with regret, that the signatures were not those of authorised officials, and declined to pay. The conspirators considered sending soldiers to take the money by force and found they could not quite bring themselves to rob a bank. They had seized the German state. The German state, politely, declined to acknowledge it.

Sunday to Tuesday: governing nothing

The middle days of the putsch feel like something between siege and pantomime. Kapp sat in the Chancellery issuing decrees that no printer would print, appointing ministers who could not reach their ministries, dissolving assemblies that continued to meet elsewhere. The city around him went dark and cold and contemptuous. Berliners queued at standpipes, walked to work that did not exist, and perfected the particular Berlin art of insolent obedience.

It would be wrong, though, to remember the week as a comedy, because people died. The putschists did not go quietly. Berlin's Security Police, the Sipo, the republic's own militarised police force, had declared for Kapp within hours, one of the clearest signs of how deeply the state's armed instruments had rotted. Ehrhardt's men dealt with hecklers and demonstrators in the manner of men trained in the Baltic: there were beatings, and there were shootings, and Berliners died at the hands of their self-proclaimed saviours on several days of that week. And beyond Berlin the stakes rose higher still. In the industrial Ruhr, the strike against the putsch became an armed rising, with a Red Army of workers fifty thousand strong taking control of the region. In Saxony and elsewhere there was fighting. The putsch had been launched to save Germany from Bolshevism, and in five days it had come closer to igniting a civil war than anything the left had managed in two years.

Meanwhile the regime's support crumbled even where it should have been strongest. The bureaucracy would not serve it, the bankers would not fund it, the parties of the respectable right edged away from it, and the army, true to Seeckt's word, sat on its hands and watched it die. By Tuesday even Kapp could see it. He had taken power with no plan beyond taking it, and power, it turned out, was not a building you simply occupied but a vast cooperative enterprise of millions of people, every one of whom had just stopped cooperating.

Wednesday the 17th: collapse

On the 17th March, five days after his men had marched in, Kapp resigned, announced that his work was done, handed his imaginary authority to Lüttwitz, and was driven to the airfield, from where he flew to Sweden. Lüttwitz held out for a few hours more as military dictator of nothing, until negotiations brokered through Schiffer, with hints of an amnesty and concessions whose precise terms would be argued over for years, gave him a way out. By that evening he too had resigned, and the putsch was over.

It had one last statement to make. The next morning the Marinebrigade Ehrhardt marched back out of Berlin the way it had come, through the Brandenburg Gate, colours flying, band playing, past silent crowds. At the Gate, the silence broke; there was jeering, and some accounts speak of a boy laughing at them. The column halted. The soldiers turned, levelled their rifles, and fired into the crowd, then set about those within reach with rifle butts before marching on singing. They left a dozen dead Berliners behind them as a parting gift. No one was ever punished for it.

The bill

If the story ended there it would be, perhaps on balance, a hopeful one: a republic saved in its darkest hour not by its generals or its judges but by its ordinary citizens, armed with nothing but the refusal to work. That refusal deserves to be remembered as one of the great acts of civic courage of the century. But the aftermath was a catastrophe in instalments.

In the Ruhr, many of the workers who had risen against the putsch refused to stand down and seized factories and even whole towns. In April the government sent the Reichswehr and the Freikorps, the very forces that had just betrayed or overthrown it, to crush them. They did so with a brutality that included summary executions by the hundred, and no court ever troubled itself much about any of it. Men of the Ruhr who had defended the republic in March were shot by its army come April, on the orders of the government their strike had saved.

Then there was the army itself. Noske resigned, his authority destroyed by that night at the Bendlerblock. Reinhardt, the one general who had been willing to fight for the republic, resigned with him. And the officer who replaced Reinhardt at the head of the army was Seeckt, the man who had refused to defend the government against the putsch. The lesson could not have been written more plainly: the army had declared itself above the republic, and the republic had responded by promoting it.

Then the response of the voters. In June 1920, in the elections that followed, the parties of the Weimar coalition, the Social Democrats, the Catholic Centre and the liberal democrats, the parties that had founded the republic, lost their parliamentary majority. They never won it back. The putsch and the blood that followed it drove German politics towards the extremes within eighteen months of the constitution being signed, and it never fully returned.

And finally, the actions of the courts. Over seven hundred men were deemed liable to prosecution for high treason over the putsch. But an amnesty law and a sympathetic judiciary reduced that number, case by case, to just one man: Traugott von Jagow, Kapp's police president, who received five years of honourable fortress detention, was given early release and later successfully sued for his entire pension. Kapp himself returned to Germany in 1922 and died before he could be tried. Lüttwitz kept his career and ultimately lived out a comfortable retirement. Ehrhardt escaped from custody with suspicious ease and went on to found Organisation Consul, the clandestine murder league whose assassins would kill Matthias Erzberger in 1921 and Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau in 1922.

Set that single conviction against the hundreds of Ruhr executions and you have the deep pattern of Weimar justice: treason from the right was seen as a misunderstanding between gentlemen, while resistance from the left was a capital crime. Every would-be putschist of the next decade, including a certain Austrian-born corporal watching from Munich, could draw the obvious conclusion about what an attempt on the republic was likely to cost. The answer was: almost nothing.

What March 1920 taught

The Kapp Putsch failed, and that really mattered. It proved that the republic had defenders in their millions, and that a modern state cannot be ruled by five thousand rifles if its people simply refuse. For five days in March, ordinary Germans gave Europe a master class in civil resistance, and it worked.

But a state learns from its crises, and what the German state learned from this one was all wrong. It learned that the army's loyalty was conditional, and did nothing to reform it. It learned that its judges would not defend it, and did nothing to reform them. It learned who its enemies were, and failed to punish them.

A society does not usually fall in a single dramatic moment; it adjusts, absorbs, and teaches itself to live with the intolerable. In March 1920 the Weimar Republic survived a mortal attack and then, with great care and attention to legal form, declined to learn a single thing from it. Thirteen years later, the price of that came due.

The new Alaric von Trelow mystery, ***Body Number Ten***, opens in Berlin in the raw days just after the Kapp Putsch, with the barricades barely down and nine executed men on a patch of waste ground, and a tenth body that should not be there. You can find it here: <https://amzn.eu/d/OfiGYvqv>