SCIENTIA MORALITAS CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS
DOI:10.5281/zenodo.10718647

From Republics to Reichs: The Origins of Nazi Paramilitarism in Interwar Germany

Matthew Wu

Horace Mann School, United States of America, mdwu1009@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The Weimar Republic, through its victories against the early insurrections aimed at taking down the imposed republican state, showed that the Republic was able to survive on its own. However, opposition to republicanism remained very much alive underground, through certain radical political parties and paramilitary organizations. This paper will analyze both left and right wing opposition to the Republic, which were both not strong enough to overthrow it, but did force its supporters into underground paramilitary organizations that contributed to the Nazi takeover. First, this paper will show how the Kapp Putsch was a manifestation of monarchist discontent against the fledgling republic. Second, it will elaborate on socialist opposition against the Weimar government, as seen through the Bavarian Soviet Republic. Third, it will explain the phenomenon of paramilitarism as an outgrowth of anti-republicanism and cyclical brutalization. Finally, it will explain how the Nazis' *Sturmabteilung* (SA) utilized paramilitary members from both the left and right-wings to fill its ranks and overthrow the Weimar Republic.

KEYWORDS: Republicanism, Freikorps, Kapp Putsch, Paramilitarism, Weimar Republic, Nazism, Civil Unrest

Introduction

Today, left-wing and right-wing radicalism are seen as two opposing forces that, although containing parallels, are each others' ultimate enemy. However, one relevant example to the contrary is the Nazi movement, which united elements of both left- and right-wing paramilitarism against the Weimar Republic during the interwar period.

In order to understand the forces opposed to the Weimar Republic, one must also understand the historical and political context in which it was founded. The German Empire, or Kaiserreich, preceded the Weimar regime. Before World War I, the Kaiserreich ascended as a world superpower despite its short lifespan, which began in 1871. For example, although the UK produced twice as much steel compared to the Kaiserreich upon its founding, Germany accounted for 25% of the world's steel production by 1913, while the UK accounted for just 10% at the same time (Torp 2014, 63). Nonetheless, the Kaiserreich was defeated in the ensuing Great War. Following this defeat, discontented Germans who sought more favorable terms in the Paris Peace Conference declared the Weimar Republic, in accordance with the victors' principles of liberal democracy and republicanism. The Weimar Republic included a parliamentary body and was led by a president-like figure known as a Chancellor. Throughout the early republic, the dominant political forces were the SPD, representing moderate socialists, Zentrum, whose name literally translates to "Center," and the conservative DNVP. It would not be until the late 1920s that the Nazi Party and communist KPD rose to prominence. Yet before the Republic stabilized politically, republican forces fought against various radical revolters who sought to replace the Weimar regime with a non-republican government.

The Kapp Putsch

From the very beginning of the Weimar Republic, republicanism and democracy were on shaky footing in Germany. The domestic turmoil following the Treaty of Versailles eliminated the

Kaiserreich and replaced it with the Weimar Republic. This regime was an outgrowth of Woodrow Wilson's idea of spreading democracy to its furthest reaches, even though democracies were "alien and unsuited to the German political way of thinking (Wheeler-Bennett 1972, 351)." Furthermore, the new majority-SPD government showed socialist control of the Republic, and the party eventually "came to be held responsible for the stab-in-the-back" due to the unpopularity of the new regime (Wheeler-Bennett 1972, 351). The stab-in-the-back theory, popular on the right wing, posited that "Germany had not been beaten by the Allies but only the machinations of her own traitors" (Wheeler-Bennett 1972, 351). This idea fostered the Germans' hatred toward their domestic political opponents, rather than the Allies who had defeated them. Shortly after, the Weimar Republic itself became a symbol of Germany's defeat, and the hatred for its republican system intensified.

In the Weimar Republic, hatred of the system and an affinity for the old monarchy was common. Many influential leaders, as well as the general public, were nostalgic for the monarchy and wanted it back, with varying degrees of reform. For example, Heinrich Bruning, a chancellor and consequential figure in the rise of Hitler, "remained a…monarchist at heart" (Wheeler-Bennett 1972, 360). Even Bavarian separatists, who were numerous within the historically independent province, were galvanized by monarchist discontent in other regions of Germany and supported the return of the House of Wittelsbach to the Bavarian throne (Landauer 1944, 209, Part II). In fact, German cities were so unstable that the first assembly of the Republic was held in the city of Weimar, in the province of Thuringia, which is the reason behind the name "Weimar Republic" (Rossol and Ziemann 2022, 121). Finally came the culmination of the seemingly nationwide opposition to the new republican government: the Kapp Putsch.

The Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch of March 1920, more commonly known as the Kapp Putsch, was an attempted coup orchestrated by the leadership of the former military under the Kaiserreich, with important figures such as Erich Ludendorff involved. It was named for its leaders, Wolfgang Kapp and Walther von Lüttwitz, who justified their coup with the view that they were taking Germany back from traitors. The putsch was supported by the Freikorps paramilitary organization, as well as parts of the Weimar army, called the Reichswehr (Blume and Wichmann 2014). The coup in Berlin was crushed within five days, but further military insurrections continued in other provinces of Germany, specifically those in the regions of Silesia and Thuringia. However, the defeat of the Kapp Putsch cemented the Republic as the political reality, at least for the time being. Indeed, the collapse of the Kapp Putsch "had established the fact that the Republic…had acquired an indefinite lease on life" (Wheeler-Bennett 1972, 353). The defeat of the Kapp Putsch showed that the Weimar Republic had the power to defend itself against insurrections, and thus had acquired enough support to persist. Monarchists, who continued to oppose the Weimar Republic, soon realized that violent overthrow was no longer a viable option in order to directly alter German politics, and instead used other ways to express their discontent (Craig 1948, 199).

Eventually, the Weimar Republic put a positive spin on the Kapp Putsch, and used pro-republican propaganda effectively in order to turn public opinion in its favor. Even though the Weimar Republic was founded amid such unpopularity, it "encouraged loyalties through the cultural celebrations of Constitution Day, encompassing flags, songs, theater performances, and dance troupes" (Canning 2010, 571). Prior to the beginning of the Great Depression in October 1929, republicanism and moderate parties became steadily more popular, all aided by pro-republican propaganda. Republicans found a foothold within German history as well, in order to argue against those who thought that republicanism was "un-German." They trumpeted the March Revolutions of 1848, adopting their most prominent symbol: the black-red-gold tricolor banner (Canning 2010, 576). The flag along with other icons became propaganda symbols for pro-

republican militias, and voters rallied behind these images. The scale of the decennial celebration of Constitution Day in August showed the triumph of the Weimar Republic, featuring hundreds of artistic and athletic events, among them a play by thousands of children (Canning 2010, 575). The successes of the Weimar Republic's propaganda were clear: they had won against right-wing anti-republican forces.

The Kapp Putsch ultimately served as a signal of the positive yet underground pro-monarchist or authoritarian sentiment. Notably, key figures in the preliminary rise of Nazism had first registered their opposition to the republic as monarchists. For example, Hitler would attempt his own coup along with an influential leader of the Kapp Putsch, Erich Ludendorff, "as a colleague" (Jones and Meltzer 1933, 413). Additionally, Franz von Papen, an avid monarchist representing the Westphalian nobility in Zentrum, was later a major legitimizing figure in Hitler's first government, in which he was the Vice Chancellor (Jones 2005, 191).

The Bavarian Soviet Republic

The two stories of the Kapp Putsch and Bavarian Soviet Republic paint the picture of a strengthening Weimar Republic that was being attacked by both the left and right. Bavaria began as an influential member state of the Holy Roman Empire and was bound to the rest of Germany through culture and language. It later became part of the Kaiserreich in 1871. Soon, as socialist movements throughout Germany rose up in rebellion, Bavarian opposition to German unification and the republican system resulted in the formation of the Bavarian Soviet Republic. Although it was quickly defeated, again showing the resilience of the Weimar Republic against explicit attacks, the emergence and persistence of paramilitarism weakened the republic.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1918-1919 collapse of the Kaiserreich, Bavarian politics underwent a dramatic shift to the left. Due to the long war, as well as the founding of the unpopular Weimar Republic, middle class Bavarians changed their support from the liberal and center parties to socialist ones, especially the Social Democratic Party and the Independent Socialists. There was also a rise in separatist sentiment: conservatives believed that separating from the rest of Germany could further prevent an ascendant socialist regime from emerging in Berlin, while socialists believed that a Bolshevik state could more easily be formed within an independent Bavaria. However, in the months leading up to the establishment of the Bavarian Soviet Republic, "there had been fewer disturbances of law and order in Bavaria than in most other parts of the Reich, and the communists had made less progress than in Berlin" (Landauer 1944, 99, Part I). Before the uprising began, it actually seemed that communism and separatism within Bavaria were on the retreat, mirroring the rest of Germany as center-leaning parties gained ground which extremists lost. Yet, the tension between the two sides came to a tipping point with the assassination of Bavarian SPD leader Kurt Eisner.

Following the assassination of Eisner, the radical wing of socialists in Bavaria became aware of their cause's political losses, and were galvanized to regain control through violence, as they did not believe they could work within the democratic system. Eventually, "the state was in a condition bordering anarchy" (Landauer 1944, 99, Part I). The Bavarian government, led by a coalition of the Independent Socialists and SPD, convened to form an emergency cabinet with near-absolute powers. The communists seemed ready to break ranks from the establishment socialist parties, feeling betrayed by their formation of the cabinet, which was created to quell the uprisings. In early 1919, the far-left wing of the Independent Socialists, in a bid to retain communist support, declared the Bavarian Soviet Republic. Immediately after the declaration of the Republic, prospects seemed good for its survival: portions of the Weimar military were sympathetic towards the

socialist cause, and it was also fairly popular in Munich, especially among the lower-middle and working classes (Landauer 1944, 100, Part I). However, the opposition to the republic soon consolidated, with moderate socialists and the SPD largely opposing the uprising and joining with the Bavarian government and center-leaning political figures. Similarly, public opinion in Bavaria soon began to turn against the uprising. Its members tried to scare Bavarians into submission, a tactic that only created a popular hatred for socialism, since the ideology had motivated such a brutal rebellion. Soon, the government sent the Reichswehr and encouraged paramilitary groups to help stop the separatists. With opposition consolidating effectively, the republic was disestablished within a month and was reabsorbed into the Weimar state (Landauer 1944, 100, Part I).

Despite its collapse, the Bavarian Soviet Republic came to shape the political climate in Bavaria throughout the interwar years. The months following its collapse saw a dramatic rise in the popularity of center and center-right parties, who increasingly came to demonize communists. Additionally, many Bavarians came to identify closely with the paramilitary units that defended them against the communists, most notably the Freikorps and the Citizens' Corps. When Allies expressed discontent with the rise of paramilitarism in Bavaria and ordered its disbandment, the "first signs that the federal government intended to comply with the Allied demand created a wave of anxiety in Bavaria, for people thought that their defense against communism depended on the Citizens' Corps" (Landauer 1944, 103, Part I). Similar to the Kapp Putsch before it, reactionary attitudes against the Bavarian Soviet Republic's perpetrators prevented future leftist armed uprisings and strengthened right-wing paramilitarism.

The Rise of Paramilitarism

The Kapp Putsch and Bavarian Soviet Republic represent two crucial moments in German history, which cemented the Weimar Republic as political reality and forced opposition to it underground. This covert resistance took the form of paramilitarism, which was a self-reinforcing phenomenon: it began and continued due to brutalization, spreading violence that further encouraged people to join paramilitary organizations. Widespread paramilitarism in Germany arose among those who wanted to rectify defeat by opposing the republican government and continued due to brutalization extended by left- and right-wing insurrectionist movements.

Paramilitarism in Europe emerged in the early interwar years, in part as a result of WWI and other conflicts between 1919 and 1922. In Germany, such conflicts were the Kapp Putsch and Bavarian Soviet Republic, which pushed the government to sponsor paramilitarism and the German public to develop a favorable view of it. Paramilitarism is defined as "military or quasi-military organizations and practices that either expanded or replaced the activities of conventional military formations" (Gerwarth and Horne 2011, 490). One often cited cause for the rise of paramilitarism across Europe was brutalization. The theory of brutalization states that the World War made many, especially veterans, accustomed to a wartime setting. These people then brought war into peace, specifically through "crime and political militancy" (Mosse 1990, 160). The brutalization theory explains why paramilitarism emerged specifically among veterans and in the border regions of Germany, namely the Rhineland and Silesia (Gerwarth and Horne 2011, 492). But there are some shortcomings in the theory: after the war, many veterans returned to civilian life, and paramilitarism seemed to be disproportionately higher in Germany, Italy, and the former territories of both Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire. Thus, another explanation accompanying the brutalization thesis is needed: defeat (Gerwarth and Horne 2011, 491).

The defeat of Germany in World War I was a major shock and humiliation to Germans. In the minds of Germans, the Kaiserreich was an ascendant state, having defeated France and united

around fifty years prior. The reversal of its recent gains, as well as the implementation of a republican system, was seen as a disgrace and symbol of its utter defeat. However, there was a "mobilizing power of defeat," one which galvanized those "individuals who chose to take it upon themselves to redress defeat and national humiliation" (Gerwarth and Horne 2011, 491-492). The combination of the brutalization and defeat theories provides a near-complete picture of the rise of paramilitarism in the early 1920s, especially in Germany.

Groups of Germans, particularly from the border regions, where the war had mostly taken place and defeat was the most apparent, had taken it upon themselves to rectify the German humiliation through violence against the republican system, a glaring symbol of defeat (Gerwarth and Horne 2011, 495). The Kapp Putsch and Bavarian Soviet Republic further brutalized the population, bringing the violence previously confined to the outlying areas to the inner regions of Germany. The failure of these uprisings led to the collapse of existing organizations like the Freikorps and other left-wing insurgent organizations, but still laid the groundwork for new organizations to rise (Bucholtz 2017). Thus, paramilitarism continued as the violence it created brutalized the population, with both left- and right-wing paramilitary organizations encouraging others to join in the spirit of anti-republicanism.

Although Weimar Germany was resilient against coups and revolutions, settling into its interwar years as a relatively stable new republic, it harbored a crucial vulnerability. Paramilitary organizations were dominated by the radical wings of both the left and right, which aimed to intimidate and subvert each other (Gerwarth and Horne 2011, 494-495). This paramilitary "arms race" led to the worsening of paramilitarism over time and strengthened underground anti-republican sentiment. This opposition later consolidated on the left into the *Roter Frontkämpferbund*, the paramilitary wing of the KPD, and on the right into the Nazis' infamous SA (Asmuss 2011). However, the Nazis were able to draw upon not only right-wing, but also left-wing rhetoric against the republican system to unite opponents of the government forced underground.

The Nazi Strategy

By borrowing rhetoric from both the extreme left and right, the Nazis created an ambiguous coalition of anti-republican forces from both sides. These radical forces came together into the Nazis' paramilitary wing, the SA. First, the Nazis gained the backing of older monarchists who orchestrated the Kapp Putsch. The Nazis signaled their support through their perpetuation of the stab-in-the-back theory, as shown in the Nazi history book *Kampf und Sieg*, written in 1938. The author glorifies the German army in World War I as having been "defeated not by the enemy, but by a Marxist stab in the back at home" (Beck 1938, 47). Later, this story would be canonized through Nazi propaganda following their takeover (Kolb 2001, 130). Furthermore, the Nazis elevated the symbol of the "Freikorps Fighter," as a militarized masculine figure who represented German nationalism and anti-communism (Bucholtz 2017). Both these efforts helped attract right-wing opponents of the Weimar Republic, primarily from organizations like the Freikorps, to the SA (Bucholtz 2017). However, the Nazis were also able to gain support from young and disgruntled socialists. The Nazi SA led a large-scale "'theft' from the revolutionary left," co-opting left-wing propaganda symbols and rhetoric in order to attract recruits (Brown 2013, 242). For example, the SA rallying cry *Achtung SA!* includes verses about the "cheeky fat bourgeois," and the SA's pledge to "break all [their] bones like treats" (Siemens 2017, 188). Furthermore, the Nazis expressed some socialist goals in their 25-Point Programme, calling for the "nationalization of all businesses," "profit-sharing in large industrial enterprises," and a significant degree of "land reform" (Noakes

and Pridham 1998, 14-16). Adopting vague talking points from both the left and right, the Nazis appealed to recruits from both sides.

To occupy this middle ground between the radical left and right, the Nazis used a strategic vagueness that allowed them to unite a broad coalition of anti-republican paramilitarists to help them rise to power (Brown 2013, 242). The best example of this tactic is shown in the *Nazi-Sozi*, a pamphlet by Joseph Goebbels. When asked if he was a monarchist or not, he replied that "the question of the form of government is irrelevant for us today." The lack of specificity shows that the Nazis attempted to use vagueness to quell infighting and unite those who shared their hatred rather than aspirations. Nonetheless, Goebbels held that "it is hard to conceive of a worse government than" the Weimar system, which he labeled as an "international used goods market in which…the highest bidding Hebrews call themselves statesmen and commissars." These attacks reflect the animosities of the anti-Semetic and anti-communist right wing, as well as the anti-bourgeois left wing. Goebbels finally states that the Nazis "will make a revolution," one that he compares to the 1918 Revolutions, of which the Bavarian Soviet Republic was a part, and the Kapp Putsch (Goebbels 1927). The explicit references to previous revolts clarify the Nazis' target demographic as those who wish to violently overthrow the republican system, or those who previously participated in these revolts. Through their use of ambiguity and alignment with anti-republican movements, the Nazis became a party that contained both left-wing and right-wing elements whose only shared goal was the overthrow of the Weimar Republic.

In addition to the demonization of republicanism, the Nazis also promoted the use of violence against perceived tyranny, encouraging paramilitarism. The theme of violence as an acceptable means to an end was common throughout Nazi literature and propaganda. The Nazis railed against the Weimar Republic, which they saw as "a result of the stab in the back," and they used this accusation as a pretext to call for a so-called "national revolution" against the Weimar Republic (Kolb 2001,130). In this revolution, the Nazis pledged to "fight to the last breath" for this "final great step for Germany," which entailed "justice for the German people," or "freedom, prosperity, and living space" (Goebbels 1927). This rhetoric inspired discontented radicals to undertake violent uprisings to achieve the Republic's overthrow. Subsequently, the Nazis also memorialized the model fighter, to whom they promised glory for his role in achieving "the freedom of the German people on German soil" (Goebbels 1927). Through this venerated icon, the Nazis aimed to further drive supporters, who hoped to elevate their position, into paramilitarism. Indeed, Nazis' calls for violence and glorification of violent figures helped expand the SA into a fighting force made up of those disillusioned by a perceived republican tyranny.

By employing violent, radical rhetoric, the Nazis were able to draw support from communists and monarchists who favored revolutions against the Weimar Republic. On the one hand, former Kapp Putsch members, especially those of the Freikorps, were "natural humus for the growth of Hitlerism," due to the ideas they shared in common with the Nazis (Jones 2004, 269-270). These ideas included the stab in the back, as well as a shared longing for the past days of the Kaiserreich (Jones 2004, 176). On the other hand, despite the modern-day depiction of Nazism as a right-wing movement, left-wingers proved equally drawn to the Nazi SA when compared to their right-wing counterparts. In fact, Rudolf Diels, who was the head of the Gestapo at the time, reported that 70 percent of SA recruits in Berlin had previously been communists in the years 1933 and 1934 (Brown 2009, 136). Inspired by Nazi ideas elaborated in the 25-Point Programme, these socialists in the Nazi movement aimed for leftist goals such as "nationalizing most industries, worker control of the means of production, and the…redistribution of property and wealth of the upper classes" (Bendersky 2014, 93; Butler 2015, 117). Moreover, the SA leader himself, Ernst Röhm, belonged to the ever-present "'socialist wing of the Nazi hierarchy" (Butler 2015, 117).

These details show that the Nazis, through their use of rhetorical pandering and strategic vagueness, were able to attract recruits from the radical right and left.

Conclusion

Although the early victories of the Weimar Republic allowed its continued existence, it also forced opposition into paramilitary organizations. Eventually, the Nazis took advantage of disorganized opposition and, using vague anti-republican rhetoric, brought the left and right wings together in the SA. The Nazis' united front of radical dissenters then went on to complete the aims of past revolutions, such as the Kapp Putsch and Bavarian Soviet Republic, using softer means to undermine the Weimar Republic. A year into Nazi rule, Hitler purged Röhm and SA leadership, denouncing them as traitors who allegedly conspired with the left-wing Strasser brothers to overthrow him (Kershaw 1998, 512-515). The convenient timing of this response to perceived socialist threats shows the real function of the SA: as an attempt to unite and galvanize paramilitary participants of past insurrectionary movements, which represented two mutually exclusive ideologies. Their adherents ultimately split up again, after their union had served the Nazis' purpose in their ascent to power.

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