



When the strike halted a coup: March 1920

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On 13 March 1920, putschists occupied Berlin's government district. The Reichswehr in Berlin refused to take action against them, and the government fled. After around a hundred hours, the putsch had failed — following the largest general strike in German history, in which some twelve million people took part. Two weeks later, the same government ordered troops to march into the Ruhr region, where the strike had turned into an uprising.

The Kapp–Lüttwitz Putsch is the best-known instance of a coup d'état in Germany that collapsed whilst the country ground to a halt. It lasted from 13 to 17 March 1920. The story does not fit neatly into any convenient narrative, and that presumably explains why it is so rarely told: the very same government that had returned to office following the strike, sent troops to march against some of the strikers two weeks later — in part the very same units that had previously staged the coup.

The background

A state without consistently reliable authority

The Republic of 1919 had armed forces whose loyalty it could not consistently rely upon. The Reichswehr had emerged from imperial units ; in addition, there were the Freikorps, i.e. irregular units that had been deployed in the east and within the country, and whose political stance was openly anti-republican.

The Treaty of Versailles required the reduction of the army and thus the dissolution of several of these units. For those affected, this meant the loss of pay, rank and purpose.

The trigger and the refusal

The ordered disbandment of the Ehrhardt Naval Brigade was the immediate cause. On the night of 13 March 1920, the brigade entered Berlin; at 6.25 am it marched through the Brandenburg

Gate. At the head of the planned new government stood the East Prussian General Provincial Director Wolfgang Kapp and General Walther von Lüttwitz.

The government demanded that the Reichswehr leadership take action against the putschists. In the meeting between Reichswehr Minister Gustav Noske, the Chief of the Army High Command Walther Reinhardt and the Chief of the Troop Office Hans von Seeckt, Reinhardt was the only one to speak in favour of this. Seeckt reported himself sick at the start of the coup; Reinhardt later resigned.

The statement attributed to Seeckt — ‘The Reichswehr does not fire on the Reichswehr’ — is not substantiated in its exact wording. Heinrich August Winkler explicitly states this. It is considered certain that Seeckt made a statement to that effect. The outcome is undisputed: the Reichswehr in Berlin did not intervene. The government left Berlin, first for Dresden, then for Stuttgart, where it arrived on 15 March.

The strike

Who called it

It is worth clarifying the exact sequence of events here, as it is usually recounted incorrectly — even by workers unions.

The call for a strike was issued on the morning of 13 March by Ulrich Rauscher, the press secretary of the Reich Chancellery, on behalf of the Reich President as well as the Social Democratic ministers and the parliamentary group. The Cabinet had decided on it during the night; it was signed by the Social Democratic ministers.

The General German Trade Union Federation under Carl Legien and the Working Group of Independent Employees’ Associations joined in that afternoon. The German Civil Servants’ Association supported the strike from 15 March onwards. The KPD headquarters initially rejected it but revised its position on 14 March, i.e. the following day; some districts had already gone on strike before then.

The call therefore came from the government, not from the workers unions. The strike was carried out by them.

The impact

According to current estimates, the strike involved around twelve million people, making it the largest in German history. Trains did not run, the postal service was suspended, and no newspapers were published; in Berlin, there was no water, gas or electricity.

Added to this was the refusal of the ministerial bureaucracy and the Reichsbank to pay out money to the new leadership. Reichsbank officials refused to accept payment orders signed by Kapp on the grounds that they were unaware of any Reich Chancellor Kapp. The refusal to pay the soldiers’ wages is attributed to the most senior Under-Secretary of State, Theodor Lewald.

On 17 March, Kapp fled. The putsch had lasted around one hundred hours; the literature counts four or five days, depending on how it is defined.

The end had also been negotiated

A fact that is usually omitted from workers union accounts: on 17 March, Minister of Justice Eugen Schiffer and party representatives in Berlin negotiated with Lüttwitz. They offered to meet some of the demands and held out the prospect of an amnesty — without the backing of the government in Stuttgart, which had consistently rejected the negotiations. Lüttwitz subsequently resigned.

This does not diminish the significance of the strike. However, it explains why criminal prosecution was later not pursued: the promised amnesty became a reality with the Act of 2 August 1920.

Nor did the strike end with the coup. It continued until the workers unions had reached a compromise on 20 March; work resumed on 22–23 March.

What tipped the balance

Which factor was decisive is a matter of debate, and the dispute remains unresolved.

The interpretation of the strike as the cause

Without the paralysis of the country, the situation could have stabilised in favour of the coup plotters. A government that can neither pay nor issue orders nor keep the country running does not govern.

The interpretation focusing on a lack of support

The opposing view emphasises the refusal of the ministerial bureaucracy, the lack of support from the Reichsbank and the business community, and the division within the Reichswehr. According to this interpretation, the coup failed primarily because it found no support amongst the elites; the strike accelerated this process, but did not cause it.

Both accounts are accurate, and they are not mutually exclusive. It can be stated that of the two events, only one had been organised in advance.

What followed the victory

The workers unions' demands

Carl Legien demanded political consequences. On 18 March, the workers unions agreed on a nine-point programme: participation in the formation of the government, the removal of tainted individuals from the civil service and the military, and the socialisation of suitable sectors of the economy. On 20 March, key demands were adopted in a watered-down form as part of a compromise with the governing parties. In government policy they subsequently played hardly any role.

At times, the formation of a government backed by the workers unions was on the cards; Friedrich Ebert offered Legien the office of Reich Chancellor. Legien declined, as did Rudolf Wissell.

There are several reasons why this came to nothing, the relative importance of which is disputed: a lack of willingness on the part of the SPD leadership, resistance from the bourgeois coalition

partners, and Legien's own refusal. Added to this is a fact that requires no explanation: in the Reichstag election on 6 June 1920, the Weimar coalition lost its majority; a bourgeois minority government followed. And Legien died on 26 December 1920, nine months after the coup.

The Ruhr region

In the Ruhr region, the general strike had turned into an armed uprising. The Red Ruhr Army, numbering 50.000 people according to standard estimates, though some sources put the figure considerably higher, had brought the region under its control.

The Bielefeld Agreement of 24 March 1920 — a separate agreement from the Berlin negotiations — was intended to settle the conflict: the surrender of weapons, immunity from prosecution for actions taken in repelling the coup, and no intervention by the Reichswehr provided the agreement was upheld, along with socio-political commitments.

It did not hold. On 2–3 April, the Reichswehr and the Freikorps marched in, including the Ehrhardt and von Loewenfeld naval brigades — units which had themselves staged a coup shortly before. The suppression claimed around 1.000 lives among the insurgents and over 200 among the soldiers. There were drumhead court-martials and mass executions; Ebert banned them on 3 April.

The coup itself had also claimed lives – around 76 in Kiel – and on 21 March, 'Bloody Sunday in Köpenick' took place in Berlin.

The conclusions and their contradictions

Legally: Is a political strike permissible?

The March strike was not a labour dispute over wages. It was directed against a state authority, not against an employer. That is precisely what makes it legally complex.

The prevailing view

According to case law, Article 9(3) of the Basic Law protects strikes only as a means of achieving objectives that can be regulated by collective agreements. Political strikes lack this connection; they are therefore deemed unlawful. Two arguments support this: the employer, who bears the loss, cannot meet the demand — and in a democracy, decisions are made by elected bodies, not by the ability of individual groups to bring the country to a standstill.

The opposing view and its limitations

Article 20(4) of the Basic Law states: "All Germans shall have the right to resist any person seeking to abolish this constitutional order if no other remedy is available." (Official translation: Federal Ministry of Justice, gesetze-im-internet.de) Two restrictions must be borne in mind here: the right is granted only to Germans, and 'this order' refers to the principles of Article 20, not to any constitutional order.

Article 6(4) of the European Social Charter grants a right to collective action 'in the event of conflicts of interest'; according to case law, it is not considered directly applicable in Germany. More substantial than the text of the Charter is the repeated finding by the European Committee

of Social Rights that the German ban on all strikes not aimed at securing a collective agreement is inconsistent with Article 6(4).

However, the case law of the European Court of Human Rights cannot currently be relied upon: in *Humpert and Others v. Germany*, the Grand Chamber ruled on 14 December 2023 by 16 votes to 1 that the German ban on strikes by civil servants does not violate Article 11 of the Convention on Human Rights. The Court has never recognised a right to political strikes.

What March 1920 demands of both sides

It was undoubtedly a political strike, and it undoubtedly defended the constitutional order.

Anyone who considers political strikes to be fundamentally inadmissible must explain what should have happened in 1920. Anyone who considers them admissible must specify the limit beyond which a government may be put under pressure by a work stoppage — for this limit determines who decides on exceptional circumstances.

Strategically: Victory without a settlement

In March 1920, the workers unions found themselves at the centre of a complete success and made little of it. Two opposing lessons are drawn from this.

The concept was missing

A movement that can fend off a coup but has no idea what should happen the day after leaves the field open to those who do.

The means were lacking

The plan would have made no difference, because the means of power were lacking. The workers unions could bring a country to a standstill, but could not govern it; anyone who had attempted to do so would have faced the civil war that the Ruhr region demonstrated on a small scale. The electoral defeat of June 1920 supports this interpretation.

Between the two lies a question that points beyond 1920: Is the ability to prevent something the same as the ability to bring something about? Experience suggests otherwise. Prevention requires many people to stop at the same time. Enforcing something requires many people to do the same thing at the same time — and that is significantly more difficult.

Socially: Who defends democracy?

In 1920, the defence of the republic did not come from the army, nor from the courts. It came from organised workers, from the ministerial bureaucracy and from the Reichsbank — in other words, from an unusual combination of strike action and refusal to administer.

This raises an uncomfortable question: if the institutions intended for this purpose fail, democracy remains dependent on others — including those forces whose methods are regarded as disruptive in normal times.

From a legal perspective: the asymmetry of prosecution

There was no thorough investigation into the coup. There was only one conviction: Traugott von Jagow was sentenced on 21 December 1921 to five years' fortress confinement, the minimum

sentence, with mitigating circumstances granted on the grounds of 'selfless love of country'. In the Reichswehr, 48 officers were relieved of their posts ; most military proceedings ended in dismissal or acquittal. Kapp died on 12 June 1922 whilst in pre-trial detention.

By contrast, in the Ruhr region alone, 2.400 prisoners were awaiting their trials in camps; numerous prison sentences, some of them lengthy, followed.

This asymmetry is well documented in the Weimar judiciary and is regarded in scholarship as one cause of the loss of confidence in the rule of law. It is a matter of debate how significant this asymmetry was — whether it was a symptom of loyalty that had already been lost or one of its causes.

What remains

March 1920 illustrates two things that are rarely considered together.

Firstly: a work stoppage can help to bring a coup d'état to an end. This is neither a theorem nor a guarantee, and the strike was not the sole cause — but without it, the sequence of events would be inconceivable.

Secondly: such a success does not in itself bring about change. The workers who defended the republic in March found themselves in April facing the same circumstances as before — with the difference that some of them were dead .

Sources

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