

# The Origins of the Freikorps: A Reevaluation

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The evils of National Socialism have cast a great shadow across German history. Half a century on from the horrors of the Final Solution, the historian's task of establishing a consensus explanation for the inexplicable has foundered in controversy. Though it has not been for lack of trying. In the frantic search for answers, virtually no German from Martin Luther to Helmut Kohl has evaded inspection for traces of Nazi roots or lingering legacies. The pursuit of truth and justice rightly produces such sensitivity. Yet, until recently, the emotional need for a single, devastating truth has masked the full scope of history between the *Kaiserreich* and the *Dritte Reich*. New inquiries have revealed not only the potential-laden seeds of fascism, but concurrent liberal ideologies, and non-ideological elements of German society. Viewed as both apologist and ground-breaking, these works seek a new understanding of the interwar period without detracting from the primacy of the Holocaust. This approach distinguishes between parallel and causal narratives, resists "hindsight history", and counters the tendency to cover weak analysis with castigation. Perhaps more importantly, it is a neutralizing strategy which invites the re-reading of existing histories with the purpose of critically "de-selecting" interpretations of the German past which *presuppose* a fascist taint.

This study will review in this way the history of the *Freikorps*, the mass of volunteer soldiers who served as the repressive military force in the Weimar Republic from January 1919, to April 1920. In the eyes of popular history, they are the direct predecessors to the Nazi paramilitary groups. Historiographically, this label is not difficult to trace. The first histories of the *Freikorps* were written in the 1930s by Nazi myth-makers intent on glorifying the ideological precursor to the SA.<sup>1</sup> Postwar historians have been far more even handed, but nonetheless reinforce a deterministic narrative of proto-Nazism. Even the best of these texts which adopt thoroughgoing methodologies tend to corrupt their neutrality by de-emphasizing characteristics which are apparently unconnected to Hitler's Germany. If analysis presupposes that nationalist paramilitary groups in interwar Germany are necessarily fascist in character, seeking critically only this conclusion, the possibility of dissociating the early *Freikorps* from the SS is nullified by prior implication. Witness the success and popularity with which Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* (1987) has located "fascism as inner experience" in a psychoanalysis of *Freikorps* soldiers, and it is difficult to ignore the potential problems of guilt by association.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than read history backward in search of a lineage of ideological militants, this study will give significant weight to a discussion of the stormtroops in the Great War, the physical and spiritual predecessors to the *Freikorps*. It will finish with the dissolution of the last volunteer units in April 1920. The volunteers movement will be approached as an extension of WWI and the subsequent revolution rather than a prelude to fascism. Though the ex-*Freikorps* soldiers did devolve into the reactionary Right and thus serve in the cause of Nazism, they did not begin so, nor were they characterized by political conviction during their sixteen months in action.

The true identity of the *Freikorps* lies not in a nascent genocidal impulse, but in the trench experience and the conditions of a revolutionary society. The lineage of the *Freikorps* lies more appropriately as a descendent of the elite stormtroopers (*Sturmtruppen*) of the Western Front, and the myths surrounding them. It was not politics, but war which interested these men. It was not ideology, but activism which characterized their movement. They were

less patriots than mercenaries; less zealous reactionaries than opportunistic war lovers. Their history is one of chaotic circumstance, traumatic identity, and vacillating purpose. They did not so much drive the proto-Nazi movement as they were harnessed to it through chance and contingency. For all the myths of a foreword-looking legacy to another war, there is the simple truth that the attention of these men, while they were *Freikorpskämpfer*, was firmly fixed backwards, towards the war they had just left or just missed.

### **Legend and Legacy**

The German stormtroops were born of necessity.<sup>3</sup> In early 1916, the Imperial German Army was locked into a two front war of attrition which with time could only mean defeat. Outnumbered and outgunned in the West, but buoyed by successes in the East, the High Command gambled on a massive assault at Verdun. In a similar spirit of hopeful risk, Captain Willy Rohr revamped a special project which had false-started in 1914, stormtroops, elite units of carefully selected, specially trained men. Physically fit weapons specialists with tactical mobility, these units were designed to literally storm the enemy lines with concentrated fire power, creating a breach which could then be exploited by massed assault waves. Trial combat engagements in May of 1916, though too limited to bring victory, were promising. Training schools for new strategies and special weaponry sprung up behind the lines.

During the Battle of the Somme, stormtroops served as an "elastic defense" against attackers.<sup>4</sup> Self-contained, highly independent companies launched explosive counter-attacks to relieve pressure on sensitive portions of the line. Heavily armed, but isolated between massive armies, stormtroops' viability hinged on officers' initiative both for a successful sortie, and a suitable line of retreat. Laden with mobile machine guns, flamethrowers, light artillery, hand grenades, semi-automatic carbines and pistols, stormtroopers maneuvered recklessly, blasting deep into the opposing trench system, and back out again. This atypical style of mobile combat was both highly effective and costly, building up a mystique of hardened, mechanized warriors around the survivors of these units.

Offensively, most notably in the counter-attack at Cambrai in November 1917, and in the March Offensive of 1918, stormtroops used "infiltration tactics."<sup>5</sup> Squads of men from 10 to 100 strong spearheaded German assault waves, probing enemy lines and skirting strong points. Sectors with weaker defenses were stormed with grenade attacks, and held only briefly before moving off to the next line of trenches. Units were not to await reinforcement, orders to attack, or artillery support, but were to advance until exhaustion or the complete penetration of enemy artillery emplacements. Disrupting enemy communications, opening the flanks on strongly held redoubts, and destabilizing lines of support, stormtroopers are often credited with the German successes in 1918.<sup>6</sup>

As success mythified their reputation, the stormtroopers grew in distinctiveness. Always unmarried, under 25, and physically fit, these soldiers fought, appeared, and thought of themselves as superior. Many units shed the traditional Reichswehr accouterments for a kit specially adapted for mobility and firepower. These alterations, including the donning of a "death's head" collar insignia, set them apart physically and psychologically from the mass of soldiers, contributing to the ethos of elitism earned in battle. Additionally, officer/men ratios dipped as low as 1-to-4, and soldiers were issued officers' pistols. Discipline was relaxed and cohesive relations encouraged within units. Men conversed with officers using the familiar "du" form, unheard of in the history of the Prussian army. Stormtroops received better rations, longer periods in rest billets, and extended leave. In action, companies were trucked to the front lines for a mission and returned upon completion, never obliged to simply hold a position. Permanently on the offensive in action, and pampered in reserve,

stormtroop morale remained high despite appalling casualty rates. Frequently this aggressive group confidence was invested in a company commander whose name, rather than regiment number, was used to refer to his troops. These officers, super-human in reputation, enjoyed a blind allegiance from their men.

Though the tactical, mechanized prowess of these elite, cohesive units will be of interest when mirrored in the *Freikorps*, the legacy of the powerful identity and world view forged through combat experiences is of primary importance. The meaning that stormtroopers derived from the war set them apart from any group of men, then or since. For many, notably represented by Ernst Jünger (himself a decorated officer), the *Fronterlebnis* had generated a new kind of man with new insights into the workings of the world. The "new man" (*der neue Mensch*) was intimately bound to the euphoric destruction in the combat experience. It had smelted a steel being with a primitive virtue, both fused with and triumphant over the mechanical slaughter that surrounded him. Though concepts like *Fronterlebnis*, *Frontgemeinschaft*, *der neue Mensch*, and the *Mannesideal* have since become strongly connoted with ideological racism, it is crucial for an understanding of both the stormtroops and the *Freikorps* to formulate the original, non-political meaning of this soldier's legend.

Ernst Jünger, in *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (1922), provides this illuminating description of the product of the stormtroopers' war experience:

*This was a whole new race, energy incarnate, charged with supreme energy. Supple bodies, lean and sinewy, striking features, stone eyes petrified in a thousand terrors beneath their helmets. These were conquerors, men of steel tuned to the most grisly battle. Sweeping across a splintered landscape, they heralded the final triumph of all imagined horror. Unimaginable energies were released as these brave troops broke out to regain lost outposts where pale figures gaped at them with madness in their eyes. Jugglers of death, masters of explosive and flame, glorious predators, they sprang easily through the trenches. In the moment of encounter, they encapsulated the spirit of battle as no other human beings could. Theirs was the keenest assembly of bodies, intelligence, will, and sensation.<sup>7</sup>*

Faced with destructive force of modern warfare, assigned both to wield and attack it, the stormtroops derived an identity from their occupation which invested them with a Zarathustrean will to power. Empowered by a primitive lust for action, the fusion of men and machines raised human awareness to a higher plane. Though on the surface an alien fantasy with disturbingly real manifestations in wartime, the psychological roots of the myth are grounded in comprehensible reactions. Omer Bartov theorizes that the very scale of destruction deployed in total war "enhanced the need for an heroic image of war" even as it negated the value of romantic conceptions of valor.<sup>8</sup> The traditional notions of heroism, chivalry and martial prowess, had somehow to be salvaged from the anonymity of industrial killing. The stormtroops, through their unique combat status, found in themselves a reconciliation of individual heroism and mass death. Man and machine merged into a "steel man", a new hero with a mechanically altered body, mind, and ability. "Here was a fascination with technology bound together with an attempt to rediscover the heroic virtues of the past, an obsession with surpassing the limits of human endurance, combined with a longing for death, an assertion of individualism along with a passionate desire to merge with the mass."<sup>9</sup> Paradoxes of individuality and anonymity, human virtue and mechanical precision, human limits and technological possibility were harmonized in the self-conception of the "new men", "anachronistic heroes" with "futuristic machines."<sup>10</sup>

The image of the primitive, battle hardened warrior was not new to history, only its manifestation in tandem with technological weapons. What made the "new man" such an

enduring concept was the coupling of the "steel man" with the primitive, spiritual awareness that could expand human limits to defeat machines. In the heat of battle, a hyper-sensitive clarity overtook these men, enabling super-human acts of will power and comprehension that thwarted mechanized weapons with mechanized men. As Jünger describes, "We've been harnessed and chiseled, but we are also such as swing the hammer and guide the chisel, we are at once the smith and the flashing steel."<sup>11</sup> The savage clarity of a primitive will blends with the cool precision of the killing machine to actualize the sacred potential of man.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the very nature of the stormtroops military function supported this fantasy world. In a war of massed metal and men, elite soldiers (or rather their tactics) *had* turned the tide of battle. The weight of numbers had not defeated the prowess of the hero. This vindication of the power of the steel soldiers gave the stormtroopers a reckless pride, a *Draufgängertum*.<sup>13</sup> Franz Schauwecker, a line officer, described the near-cyborg spirit: "These men were living guns, with melinite muscles and tripod legs; their eyes narrowed to slits, thin blue horizons looking out toward men swarming forward between branches and tree trunks, red wine in their bellies, like tanked-up motors turned loose with no brakes to hold them."<sup>14</sup> Naturally, not all stormtroopers wished or were able to express their transformation in these terms, but the similarities of sentiment in written testimony bear witness to the common affirmation of these ideals.

In ideological terms, the implications of the war experience and the "new man" were much hazier. A nationalist interpretation of the *Mannesideal* contends that it represented a shift towards the individual as the source of the "nation", a new legitimacy of patriotism embodied in the soldiers.<sup>15</sup> How the German people really felt about the ideals of the "new man" is unclear, though likely the war weary population did not put much stock in the violent nature of war-crazed veterans, at least in the short term. Regardless of public sympathy, outspoken stormtroopers were sure that the truths they had won so dearly would catapult them to the top of a new utopian Europe. Yet this had less to do with a political ideology in the ascendant than with the belief that the suffering endured in war would be rewarded with a corresponding rise to greatness. Thus bleak November 1918 could not be the end of the war. They had not lost. They had defended the line until the armistice, marched home in formation, and looked ahead to the next challenge, the coming of the new world. "They had no particular ideological convictions and no special political outlook. All they knew was fighting and the tradition of the 'front line soldier.'"<sup>16</sup>

### **Out of the trenches and into the Freikorps**

Perhaps the most critically under-emphasized point in the history of stormtroopers-come-*Freikorpskämpfer* is the speed at which events progressed in the months around the armistice. A wild hope that German arms would win the war had held until the early fall of 1918. Yet, only weeks later, Ludendorff was suing for peace. Before the full implications of this radical downturn could filter out to the front lines, a revolution was underway at home. The reserve troops melted into the countryside, and rebellious soldier's councils sprang up from a de facto demobilization. By January, the official report of the War Ministry admitted that the Western Army was "essentially only...a large horse-and-wagon-depot."<sup>17</sup> The High Command's plan to reduce the army to prewar levels in order to retain sufficient force to validate the November pact between Groener and Ebert proved illusory. Not only did the troops disappear, but along with them tens of thousands of weapons.<sup>18</sup> Those Reichswehr units which did remain (notably the Horse Guards) proved embarrassingly unreliable in action against mutinous sailors in Berlin.<sup>19</sup> Anxious to find alternative armed support against the revolt, newly instated Minister of Defense Gustav Noske found the answer waiting for discovery.

The rapid conclusion to the war was not welcome to all soldiers, despite the army's disintegration. The last troops to retire from the Western Front had among them a large proportion of stormtroop battalions, used to fill the gaps in the weakened line in the last days of the war. Returning indignantly to their garrison towns, they found orders for demobilization. Yet these men were in no mood to admit defeat, nor relinquish their arms, nor consent to a cessation of hostilities. Consequently, they began to form into volunteer corps, organized and led by charismatic stormtroop officers.

The first was created by General Georg von Maercker in mid-December of 1918. His self-contained mini-division was modeled on a stormtroop battalion, complete with squads of specialists for machine guns, mortars, light artillery, flame-throwers, armored cars, tanks, and even aircraft.<sup>20</sup> Recruitment proceeded by word of mouth, as officers selected NCO's from their old units, and they in turn found willing soldiers. Most of the volunteers were veterans, often stormtroops, commonly young, middle class, and unmarried. Many were part of the Imperial officer corps, 250,000 strong at war's end. Unsatisfied with the prospect of losing the social and personal prestige earned through battlefield commission, some 25% of junior officers joined the *Freikorps*. Others joined for the promise of pay, food, lodging, and security in times of civil unrest; others sought adventure and a renewed possibility of experiencing the thrill of combat.<sup>21</sup> A significant number of volunteers were students or cadets, too young to have fought in the war, but hungry for a chance. Common to all was a will to continue or experience the *Fronterlebnis* and reify the "new man", and to vindicate the defeat they felt was forced upon them by back-stabbing civilians. Maercker's Corps was to serve as a model for the dozens upon dozens of similar units to follow.<sup>22</sup>

The independent formation of volunteer corps coincided fortuitously with the desperate void of armed power suffered by the tottering government. In the first week of January, six weeks after armistice, Noske and Ebert saw the Maercker Corp in review. Major Kurt von Schleicher presented the High Command with a plan to recruit, arm, and fund more of these volunteer corps to rebuild the military without alarming Allied sensitivity to overt martial organization in Germany.<sup>23</sup> Volunteers were to be used in the defense of the eastern frontier, under threat from Polish irregulars, and in protection of the Republican government struggling to gain a hold on power.

Simultaneous recruitment and spontaneous formation amongst zealous veterans flooded the country with armed men. Though January saw relatively organized units materialize, the following months produced a varied assortment of *Freikorps*, from basically intact veteran battalions to hodgepodge collections of mercenaries, adventurers, and criminals.<sup>24</sup> Loyalty lay partially to the government treasury, but primarily to the charisma of the unit's leader, a *Führerprinzip* which characterized the *Freikorps* as it had the stormtroops before them. Once again, units bore the name of their commander. By the summer of 1919, between 200,000 and 400,000 men were under arms in volunteer corps.<sup>25</sup>

Parallels between stormtroops and volunteers went beyond the physical fact that these were the same men under the same leaders. The soldiers carried with them their expertise and love of machines, cohesive informalities, absolute loyalties, a common understanding about the war and a resentment over its conclusion. However, perhaps primary is the carry-over of the legend of the stormtroopers and the identity of the "new man." The spirit of the "new man" with his primitive, savage will encased in the metallic perfection of a war machine had not dissipated with the armistice. It had been only a few weeks between final demobilization and *Freikorps* formation. If hot blood had cooled without a battle, it was put to boil again by revolutionary Germany, the insult of the "stab-in-the-back" defeat, and the prospect of a renewal of the trench spirit in combat against insurrectionists or eastern invaders. Back among comrades, led by worshipped officers, and still obsessed with a primal confidence,

they could recognize no end to the war. The attractive alternative was to consider it still in progress. Fighter and historian of the *Freikorps*, Ernst von Salomon, reflected that "they had not yet got over the war. War had moulded them; it had given a meaning to their lives and a reason for their existence. They were unruly and untamed, beings apart, who gathered themselves into little companies animated by a desire to fight."<sup>26</sup>

Here it would seem appropriate to point out that the "stab-in-the-back" (*Dolchstoß*) felt by the *Freikorps*, and the denial of defeat, were patently *non-political*. It was not yet a political slogan of distorted significance. It was a matter of soldierly identity. Defeat would betray their war, their sacrifice, as meaningless. Further, it threatened to expose the legend of the steel man and his glorious future as a fantasy. The prospect of a painful disparity between imagined identity and real destiny produced a tremendous need to act, deny, and continue to experience even in perpetual fabrication the life which had sustained the myth. No ideology yet existed, nor was it needed. Only action would suffice. One soldier explained, "We adopted activism as a moral principle."<sup>27</sup> By aligning themselves with the government, they were not so much declaring a political goal, as following the path of least resistance towards the nearest fight in defense of a mythical nationalism, and in celebration of a glorified war experience. As would be the case throughout their short history, the *Freikorps* shared aims, but not reasons, with the political powers that controlled them. One commander remembered: "The pure *Landsknechte* didn't much care why or for whom they fought. The main thing for them was that they *were* fighting... War had become their career. They had no desire to look for another... War made them happy—what more can you ask?"<sup>28</sup>

Though of course these men were atypical of the majority of veterans (400,000 out of a possible 11 million), the disproportionate influence they held in revolutionary Germany alone merits a disproportionate attention to their unique state of mind. Still further, they were not alone in their action-based postwar militancy. The paramilitary Arditi which arose from the Italian army, and the brutal Black and Tans who terrorized Ireland after leaving the British forces were manifestations of a similar postwar mentality. Plus, as Richard Hamilton insightfully notes, a similar strata of a-political, combat enthusiasts is likely to be found in every mass army of the 20th century, particularly among young, middle class men, and especially in militaristic cultures.<sup>29</sup>

### Continuing the War

*People told us that the War was over. That made us laugh. We ourselves are the War. Its flame burns strongly in us. It envelops our whole being and fascinates us with the enticing urge to destroy. We obeyed...and marched onto the battlefields of the postwar world just as we had gone into battle on the Western Front: singing, reckless and filled with the joy of adventure as we marched to the attack; silent, deadly, remorseless in battle.*<sup>30</sup>

The *Freikorps* suppression of the Spartacist revolt in Berlin on January 10-15, 1919, the first military action taken by the newly formed units, has come to represent the volunteers activities in the historical imagination. Indeed, it would be correct to state that the most important *historical* function of the volunteers was the suppression not only of the November Revolution in Berlin, but their repression of the Left throughout the major cities of Germany from January to May.<sup>31</sup> Without the efficient military actions of the *Freikorps* and the brutal reprisals they inflicted on occupied cities, the Weimar Republic might never have existed. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the fighters shared the same priorities as the Ebert government. The battle at home, though attractive as revenge against back-stabbing civilians, did not hold the allure of the continued war on the Eastern Front.<sup>32</sup>

Most *Freikorps* soldiers were recruited on the promise that they would be sent to the eastern frontier to defend Prussia against Polish irregulars and the encroaching Red Army in the Baltics. "Few, if any, of the government's appeals for volunteers openly mentioned that the units were to be used for the suppression of internal unrest."<sup>33</sup> Soldiers were promised Latvian citizenship (a rumor which quickly expanded to free land) as well as the chance to fight Russians, wartime adversary as well as the ideological enemy of the moment. Some men, including Ernst von Salomon, were stymied by government orders to fight revolutionaries at home. He and his comrades deserted from the Weimar garrison to join the real war.<sup>34</sup> To these self-styled *Baltikumers*, the fight in the East was an extension of the German front of the Great War, the last chance to live and relive the war experience cut short by the revolution. Armed to the teeth, organized and led by ex-stormtroopers, and engaged in a mobile mode of combat that mirrored the actions last seen on the fields of France in the March offensive of 1918, the primitive savage of the "new man" was loosed on the Baltics. Salomon recalled:

The blood surging through our veins was full of a wild demand for revenge and adventure and danger...We were a band of fighters drunk with all the passions of the world; full of lust, exultant in action. What we wanted, we did not know. And what we knew, we did not want! War and adventure, excitement and destruction. An indefinable, surging force welled up from every part of our being and flayed us onward.<sup>35</sup>

By virtue of Allied anxiety over a potential Bolshevik threat, the German forces were permitted to advance into the Baltics to engage the Russian Army in February of 1919.<sup>36</sup> The High Command, hoping to quickly occupy and use the Baltics as a bargaining chip in the peace process, committed full resources to the task. The Iron Division, an amalgam of *Freikorps* under Major Josef Bischoff formed around the remnants of the German 8th Army (last in action a few months earlier on the same ground) led the assault. The capture of Riga, on May 22, 1919, proved the "high-water mark" of the *Freikorps*' military successes.<sup>37</sup> Not surprisingly, the assault on the strongly defended city used the infiltration tactics of a stormtroop offensive. The leading elements of the roving companies reached the citadel at the city center in the height of the fighting.<sup>38</sup> The volunteers were too successful, as it turned out. The farther the Russians fell back, the more concerned the Allies became of a German martial threat. Despite two Allied orders to the Ebert government to call back its troops, dissolve its volunteer corps, and renounce any claim on the region, the war continued through the twice mutinous tenacity of *Freikorps* fighters, unwilling to be stabbed in the back again.

### Summer of Discontent

Though the last of the *Freikorps* fighters would not leave the Baltics until November of 1919, it was clear in mid-summer that the game was up. The triumphant taking of Riga which was to redress the defeat of 1918 had lost its luster when the British forced its evacuation. The eager, activist recreation of the war experience deteriorated into a wanton bloodletting born of a helpless frustration. On the homefront, the repression of revolt had lost even the facade of national service and descended into a series of increasingly brutal reprisals on enemy and innocent alike (particularly Munich, in May). "A large number of free-corps fighters no longer knew, or cared what they were fighting for, and as they grew more powerful they became more independent. They would go wherever and whenever they were ordered, but what they did when they got there was no longer controlled by the government."<sup>39</sup>

Politically unformed and uninformed, soldiers had little outlet into which this restless discontent could be channeled other than violence. Ernst von Salomon explains that "what

was of real importance was not so much that what we did should be the right thing, but that we should take some action to save us from the lethargy of the times...each man charged with a suppressed aimless energy, knowing that he must fight, fight at all costs, whatever his political aims."<sup>40</sup> Drawing upon the ruthless primitive spirit of the stormtroop legend, heavily armed to reproduce the steely fantasy, *Freikorps* desperately grasped at a utopian *Fronterlebnis*, contemptuous of politicians and the weakness of ideology. "The precisely constructed military machine [of the Free Corps] rolled blindly and without any concern whatsoever for ideological purpose."<sup>41</sup>

By late summer, for all but the mutinous *Baltikumers*, there were no more fights to occupy the men. To add insult to injury, in late June, the government had signed the Versailles Treaty, agreeing to slash its half million soldiers down to 100,000 by April of 1920.<sup>42</sup> The mollifying potential future of a military career was denied to all but a few. Yet another stab-in-the-back rankled the volunteers nearly as much as inactivity. With no one left to kill, the *Freikorps* retreated to armed labor camps, to grease their weapons and brood.<sup>43</sup> Yet after the whirlwind of battles that had occupied the previous nine months, and despite their growing frustration, the volunteers stayed relatively quiet. "Although the discontent of the Free Corps had a definite political potential, it was not in itself political."<sup>44</sup> Reactionaries saw the opportunity and seized it, much as Ebert and the SPD had done before, presenting a new fight to the volunteers; a shared temporary aim, but not yet a common ideology.

### **Kapp Putsch, Ruhr, and Politicization**

Inactive in the winter of 1919-1920, the remaining *Freikorps* were facing a spring deadline for dissolution by demand of the Versailles Treaty. Meanwhile, several of the volunteer commanders had allied themselves with conservative generals and bureaucrats led by General Baron Walther von Lüttwitz and Wolfgang Kapp in an attempt to stay the execution and topple the hated signers of the "Diktat." On the morning of March 13, the Ehrhardt Brigade marched unopposed into Berlin to escort Kapp into an empty Chancellery. The coup was as bloodless as it would be brief.

The Socialist government had taken the trouble to alert the Left of the putsch on their way out of town, fomenting a call for a General Strike, paralyzing Berlin and most of the country, not to mention sparking a reactionary uprising in the Ruhr. Although many of the *Freikorps* sided with the putschists, they did little to force the will of the new government on the people. This was largely because Kapp failed to provide the volunteers with what they wanted, violence. Faced with the unified resistance of the working class, the new leader shied away from a brutal show of force. Leaning always toward caution, and losing support by the hour, the putschists hopes quickly faded. Though individual *Freikorps* stirred up trouble in a variety of locales, nothing substantial occurred to advance ideological ends. "The Free Corps' involvement in the Kapp Putsch remained more an expression of resentment and anger, more an act of political activism, than the expression of a conscious, or strictly counterrevolutionary, political program."<sup>45</sup> Their motives for supporting the putsch were purely negative. Indeed, many of the soldiers had never heard of Kapp before they marched under his banner.<sup>46</sup> Ernst von Salomon wrote about the time: "It was no inspired, controversial political idea that spurred us to protest. The actual cause lay simply in despair, which is never articulate."<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps the greatest indicator of *Freikorps* indifference was their immediate change of sides a week later in the Ruhr. Days after assisting the overthrow of the Socialist regime, they were back in its service, in what proved to be the volunteers' last and bloodiest "full-scale military offensive."<sup>48</sup> Amidst the chaos of the Kapp Putsch, a Red Army of perhaps 80,000 men formed in the Ruhr, set to launch a counterrevolution from the left. Before they



got the chance, the Republic was restored and sent the *Freikorps* to repress the uprising. Amongst the troops in the field was the Ehrhardt Brigade, the vanguard of the Kapp Putsch.<sup>49</sup> The *Freikorps*, battle-hungry after nine months idle time, streamed in and smashed the rebels. The savagery of the assaults and reprisals reflected the frustration of the soldiers. A young student volunteer reported: "No pardon is given. We shoot even the wounded. The enthusiasm is tremendous—unbelievable...Anyone who falls into our hands first gets the rifle butt and then is finished off with a bullet."<sup>50</sup> Five days later, the region was secured. Save a scant few which were swallowed into the restricted Reichswehr, the remaining *Freikorps* were officially disbanded shortly thereafter.

The volunteers ducked out of sight into underground organizations (dubbed the "Black Reichswehr"). Many were harnessed over time to the politics of the reactionary right which provided ample violent occupation for jaded ex-volunteers. The Kapp Putsch had taught the soldiers to question the suitability of activism before ideology. The barricades-before-manifestos style of the *Freikorps*, inherited from the legend of the "new man", had yielded them only frustration.<sup>51</sup> The fantasy of the super-soldier had begun to break apart under the pressure of final defeat, dashed hopes, and the failure of a false utopia to materialize. Over time, and lacking the military campaigns which had kept them attached to the pure legacy of the stormtroops, they drifted into the pursuit of another false utopia, Hitler's. But, it was only *after* they ceased to be the *Freikorps* that the shift occurred. During the actual existence and service of the volunteer forces, political goals seldom, if ever, entered the picture. The violence of the volunteers did not co-opt fascist ideology, but rather was co-opted by it.<sup>52</sup> The relationship between the volunteers and the SA was not necessarily causal, but circumstantially (and retrospectively) realized. The perverse, utopian idealism of the "new man", *as the stormtroopers knew it*, disintegrated with the last of the *Freikorps*, well before Hitler sought to use it, leaving the Nazis to rearrange, distort and exploit the pieces of a burned-out legend.

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1. Three conspicuous examples are Ernst von Salomon, *Das Buch vom Deutschen Freikorps-Kämpfer* (1938); Edgar von Schmidt-Pauli, *Geschichte der Freikorps* (1936); and Friedrich von Oertzen, *Die Deutschen Freikorps* (1939). Other texts include memoirs written by former *Freikorps* commanders in the 1920s and 1930s which are equally grandiose and selective in style and content. For full bibliographical citation, see R. G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism*, (Cambridge, 1952).
  2. The quoted comment is taken from Jessica Benjamin and Aaron Robinbach's foreword to volume two of Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, (Cambridge, 1987). Regardless of one's opinion concerning the degree of insight or appropriateness of a psychoanalytic history of *Freikorps* texts which posits the origin of the fascist mentality of violence in the fear of ego dissolution and a hatred of the feminine in the minds of the volunteers, it seems conclusive that his fundamental aim is to elucidate the Nazi period and aid in the explanation of the Holocaust, not to do justice to the *Freikorpskämpfer* themselves.
  3. The following short history of the stormtroops, variously referred to as shock troops (*Stosstrupps*), storm battalions (*Sturmabteilung*), or storm divisions (Sturmabteilung), comes largely from Waite, 23-30; and H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918*. (London, 1997).
  4. H. Herwig, *The First World War...*, p.333.
  5. *Ibid.*, p.333.
  6. *Ibid.*, p.400.
  7. Quoted in Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, v. 2, p.159.
  8. Omer Bartov. *Murder in our Midst*, (Oxford, 1996), p.16.
  9. *Ibid.*, p.30.
  10. *Ibid.*, p.32.
  11. Ernst Jünger, from *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (1922), quoted in Thomas Nevin, *Ernst Jünger and Germany: Into the Abyss, 1914-1945*. (London, 1996), p.65.
  12. Nevin, pp.68-9.
  13. *Ibid.*, pp.53-54.

14. Franz Schauwecker, *Aufbruch der Nation*, quoted in Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, v.2., p.169.
15. George Mosse. *Fallen Soldiers*, (Oxford, 1990), p.20, pp.27-8.
16. Richard M. Watt. *The Kings Depart*, (Suffolk, 1968), pp.278-79.
17. Richard Bessel. *Germany After the First World War*, (Oxford, 1993), pp.77-79.
18. *Ibid.*, p.81.
19. F. L. Carsten. *The Reichswehr and Politics, 1918 to 1933*, (Oxford, 1966), p.21.
20. R. G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism*, p.36.
21. *Ibid.*, pp.42-8.
22. Nigel Jones. *Hitler's Heralds*, (London, 1987), p.55.
23. *Ibid.*, p.32.
24. Richard M. Watt. *The Kings Depart*, pp.329-330.
25. R. G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism*, p.40. Any generalization I make about volunteer forces will refer only to those *Freikorps* under at least the nominal control of the government and the High Command. However, there were numerous other paramilitary groups, including the Emergency Volunteers (*Zeitfreiwilligen*), Civil Guards (*Einwohnerwehr*), Security Police (*Sicherheitspolizei*), and various armed student groups. Though some were quite numerous (the Civil Guards were to number over a million), none were of the same roving, military nature as the *Freikorps*. For details on these groups see James Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany*, (Bloomington, 1977).
26. Salomon, Ernst von, *The Outlaws*, trans. of *Die Geächteten*, Ian Morrow. (London, 1931), p.57.
27. Gabriel Krüger, from *Die Brigade Ehrhardt* (1971), quoted in Mosse, p.169.
28. Manfred von Killinger, from *Das Waren Kerle!* (1944), quoted in R. G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism*, p.42.
29. Richard Hamilton. *Who Voted for Hitler?*, (Princeton, 1982), pp.586-88. Hamilton's conclusions are based on a comparison with studies of American soldiers from WWII whose profiles indicated that 15% of veterans would have been at least a hypothetical match to *Freikorps* sensibilities.
30. F. W. Heinz, soldier in the Ehrhardt Brigade, from his memoir, *Sprengstoff* (1930), quoted in Waite, p.42.
31. For a full chronology of *Freikorps* activities, refer to Appendix A.
32. R. G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism*, p.107.
33. Diehl, 43.
34. Salomon, 58.
35. Ernst von Salomon, from *Die Geächteten* (1930), translated as *The Outlaws*, quoted in Waite, 108.
36. Allied leaders, concerned to stem a Russian advance into Eastern Europe, fearing public reproach if they committed Allied soldiers, and feeling they had an adequate hold on the German military while the Versailles negotiations were in process, actually sanctioned the use of the *Freikorps* to aid a weak Latvian government.
37. See Watt, 423-434, for a graphic account of the Baltic Campaign.
38. See Salomon, 71, for an account of the battle.
39. Watt, 344.
40. Salomon, 96-7.
41. Ernst von Salomon, from his *Nahe Geschichte* (1936), quoted in Waite, 68.
42. Carsten, 51.
43. Diehl, 47.
44. Diehl, 54.
45. Diehl, 55.
46. Waite, 165.
47. Salomon, 141.
48. Jones, 183.
49. Waite, 174.
50. Jones, 182.
51. Ernst von Salomon, in *The Outlaws*, includes a scene in the aftermath of Kapp in which he delivers an epiphany-like monologue to his comrades. He concludes that he must go in search of an ideology to match his understanding of the truths of the war experience and the "new man". See *The Outlaws*, 172-4.
52. Bessel, 262.
53. Facts for chronology taken from R. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952.