

The Republic's Wolves: The Strange Life and Afterlife of the Freikorps

In the winter of 1918, the German army came home and simply faded away. Eight million men were under arms in November; within weeks the great majority of them had simply walked away, entrained, drifted, vanished into a hungry country, selling their boots and greatcoats as they went. The most formidable military machine in Europe did not surrender so much as evaporate. And the new government, a government of socialists who had spent their careers denouncing militarism, looked out at a capital full of revolutionary sailors and armed workers' councils and discovered that it commanded, in any practical sense, nothing at all.

What it did next set the course of the whole decade, and it is one of the darkest bargains in modern history. It hired back the war.

They were called Freikorps, free corps, a name borrowed from the volunteer bands of the Napoleonic age, and between December 1918 and the early twenties perhaps a quarter of a million men passed through them. When the new republic needed soldiers who would actually fight, these were the men who answered, and Gustav Noske, the Social Democrat who took charge of military affairs, accepted the role history had left him with a phrase that has never stopped echoing: someone, he said, must be the bloodhound.

The politics of what followed, the crushed risings, the killings, belong to another essay. What I want to do is something the political histories rarely pause for, not what happened, but who they were. I want to look at the Freikorps as a piece of society. Who actually joined? What were they paid? What did they sing, what did they wear, what did they believe they had been promised? And what happened to a quarter of a million armed, embittered men when the state that had hired them tried, at last, to switch them off?

Because that last question is where the strangest story of the early republic begins.

Who signs up for a war that is over?

First there are the officers, because the Freikorps were built around like a pearl around a piece of grit. The armistice had left thousands of junior officers, lieutenants and captains in their twenties, men who had commanded storm companies and led trench raids and possessed, at twenty-six or seven, no civilian skill except leadership under fire. Peace offered them a clerk's stool, if it offered them anything. The Freikorps offered them what they had lost: command, purpose, a mess table, men who obeyed. Many of them had also never made peace with the peace. The war had ended, in their telling, because politicians had surrendered, not because they believed it was lost. They were wrong, but that was what they believed.

These officers, often Captains or Majors, rather than senior officers, gathered men, often based on a kernel of men they had served with. These units were not

numbered, like in the army, they were often named for their commanders, like the private bands of some earlier, wilder century: Maercker's Volunteer Rifles, the Ehrhardt Brigade, Freikorps Rossbach. A man did not join the army. He joined Maercker, or Ehrhardt, or Rossbach, and his loyalty was to that unit and that man, not to any republic. Contemporaries reached instinctively for the word *condottieri*, and they were right to. These were warbands wearing the remnants of a uniform.

Beneath the veterans came another second layer: the boys. Schoolboys and students who had been fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen when the war ended, who had been raised on it, drilled for it, promised it, and then cheated of it by the armistice. The universities emptied into student companies. These were often the most ferocious recruits of all, because they had a manhood to prove and only the older men's stories of heroism to measure it against. A generation too young for the war spent the peace trying to have one of its own to measure themselves against.

And after them were the simplest recruits of all: the hungry. A Freikorps man drew pay, and the pay was better than the dole. He got boots, a greatcoat, a bed, rations at a time when the British naval blockade had only just lifted and the cities were empty of food and hope. Not every volunteer a fanatic. Plenty were simply cold and wanted food, and the Freikorps were, among everything else they were, one of the few employers in Germany that was hiring.

They developed, with remarkable speed, a culture. Symbols painted on helmets and lorries: death's head, the iron cross, the swastika. The banners and unit badges of a private army. The marching songs: brutal, visceral, one of which boasted of the crooked cross years before anyone had heard of the obscure Bavarian party that would make it infamous. Around the commanders grew genuine cults of personality, in miniature. If you want to understand certain later decades you can do worse than start here, with these self-contained brotherhoods with their leader-worship and their contempt for the civilian world. But that is hindsight. In 1919 they were simply the men with the guns.

The republic's praetorians

And the republic used them. It is one of the bitterest ironies of the age that when the National Assembly met in early 1919 to write the constitution of the most liberal state Germany had ever known, it met in Weimar, and it deliberated in safety because Maercker's riflemen ringed the town. The republic's birth certificate was signed under Freikorps guard. Throughout that first year the Freikorps were sent wherever the government's rule had failed, and they restored it, with a thoroughness and brutality that made their name a curse in working-class districts for a generation: Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, Hannover.

The government argued, most of all to itself, that it was temporary. The men would be absorbed into the small new army, or paid off, or would simply go home. But a great many of them had no home to go to, in any sense that mattered, and events were about to demonstrate what they did when if you tried to tell them that the adventure was over.

The Baltic mirage

First came perhaps the strangest chapter of all, and it is almost forgotten now. In 1919, with Allied encouragement, thousands of Freikorps men went east, to the Baltic, nominally to hold the line against the Bolsheviks in Latvia and Lithuania. The recruiting effort inside Germany promised rather more than a campaign. It promised land. And it was based on a solid historical basis. For seven hundred years the ruling class of much of the Baltic states had not been Lithuanians, Latvians, or Estonians, they hadn't even been Russian, even when they had been part of the Russian Empire, they had been German. Descendants of lords who had come to power under the rule of the Teutonic Knights. They had been loyal to the Tsars, leading to the historical peculiarity of German generals with 'von' in their name commanding units in battle against German armies during the Great War. This was now used to recruit men to save the lands of those German landowners from their local enemies. Posters and recruiting agents spoke of farms in the east, settlement, a colonist's future for the veteran. Whether anyone with genuine authority ever signed such a promise scarcely mattered. It was believed, and belief moves men.

So, in the middle of 1919 there were private German armies fighting a private war on the Baltic coast, months after the World War had ended: taking Riga in May amid atrocities on all sides, quarrelling with the very Latvian state it was supposed to be protecting, and dreaming of manors and farms. They did their job, in concert with local nationalist Baltic forces, the Bolsheviks were defeated. Then they fell out with their allies, who wanted the majority Estonian, Latvians, and Lithuanians to rule their own countries, not Germans. When Berlin, under Allied pressure, ordered them home, many simply refused to go. Whole units tore off their German insignia and re-enlisted overnight in a freebooting White Russian force under an adventurer called Bermond-Avalov, which promptly attacked the Latvians. Some Freikorps in Germany, hearing their comrades were cut off, even marched over a thousand kilometres east against explicit orders to fetch them, Rossbach's men most famously, crossing the frontier as cheerful mutineers.

It ended, inevitably, in defeat. Beaten before Riga in the autumn, the Baltic adventurers straggled back into East Prussia through the winter of 1919, frostbitten, brutalised, and convinced they had now been betrayed twice, once by the armistice and once by the republic that had ordered them home from their promised land. Men do not come back from that sort of expedition and take up bookkeeping. They came back looking for the next fight, and the wages that the Republic still owed them.

One hundred hours in March

The reckoning arrived in the spring of 1920, fittingly enough over a matter of employment. The peace treaty obliged Germany to shrink its forces drastically, to an army of less than 100,000 men. The government had prevaricated, ignoring the Freikorps as not being counted amongst that number. The Allies were neither fooled, nor inclined to wait. The German government at last moved to dissolve the most formidable of the remaining Freikorps formations, among them the Ehrhardt Brigade, ex-naval, Baltic-hardened, and quartered menacingly close to Berlin. The brigade declined to be dissolved. In the small hours of the thirteenth of March 1920 it

marched into the capital behind its death's-head banners, swastikas painted on its helmets, and installed as chancellor an obscure East Prussian official named Wolfgang Kapp.

What happened next deserves to be far better known, and it is the hinge on which this whole story turns. The government fled south. The army, asked to put the rising down, declined to fight it: General von Seeckt made it quietly plain that the new Reichswehr would not fire upon men it regarded as its own. On paper, the putsch had won. Berlin was held, the government was gone, the army stood aside.

And then the city simply switched itself off. The response to the putsch was a general strike, and it remains the largest in German history, twelve million people, called by the unions and joined by nearly everyone else. No trams. No trains. No newspapers. No water, no gas, no electricity. The ministries emptied; the civil servants would not serve. Kapp sat in the Chancellery issuing proclamations that no printer would print, and no bureaucrat would enforce, ruler of a capital in which he could not switch on a light. It took roughly one hundred hours. By the seventeenth of March the putsch dissolved into farce, Kapp fled to Sweden, and the Ehrhardt Brigade prepared to march out of a city it had conquered and could not govern.

They did not go quietly. As the brigade withdrew through the Brandenburg Gate, jeered by a Berlin crowd that could smell the defeat on them, some incident, a boy's laughter in most tellings, tipped them over the edge, and they turned their rifles and their rifle butts on the civilians, leaving dead and wounded on the pavement as their parting signature. Then they marched away in good order, singing. That is the clearest image of the whole phenomenon: beaten not by a complicit army but by civilians who refused to allow it and switched off a city, then killing unarmed civilians on their way out.

Dissolved, not disbanded

This is the part that is most important. It's also, incidentally, where the next novel in the Alaric von Trelow Mysteries sits. After the failure of the putsch, the Freikorps era officially ended. Units were dissolved, rolls were closed, the republic congratulated itself. But things are rarely simply and you can dissolve a unit, but not the men who made them. The men remained, with their skills, their networks, their weapons, of which astonishing quantities were never surrendered, and their now-finely honed sense of betrayal.

The aftermath showed immediately what that meant. Within weeks, some of the same formations that had marched for Kapp were fighting for the government again, sent to crush the workers' rising in the Ruhr that the strike had helped ignite, the republic once more hiring the wolves it had just failed to cage. In Thuringia that same March, a company of Marburg students, the boy-soldiers of the Freikorps movement, shot fifteen captured workers by the roadside at Mechterstädt and were acquitted by the courts amid national outrage, a verdict that taught every armed man in Germany the price of killing a communist, which was next to nothing.

And then the movement went underground and became something worse. Ehrhardt's veterans reconstituted themselves as a secret society with an innocuous name and turned from seizing capitals to murdering ministers; I have written and talked elsewhere about Organisation Consul and what it did in the summers of 1921 and 1922. Others buried their rifles, in some cases literally, and gathered in Bavaria, which had become a warm and welcoming refuge for every armed enemy of the republic. Others drifted into the borderland formations, the labour camps, the shadow armies of the Black Reichswehr, where the old comradeship curdled into paranoia, and men suspected of talking were found in the woods, killed by their own in the so-called Feme murders, medieval vengeance conducted by a pistol. The state had finally ended the Freikorps, but it did not end the Freikorps men, and through the twenties they moved beneath the surface of German life like an old wreck under a shipping lane, invisible, and tearing the bottom out of things.

That, to a novelist, is irresistible plot material, and I may as well confess it. A quarter of a million trained men, bound by private loyalties, feeling they were owed a war, denied a victory and its spoils, officially non-existent. Every one of them with a past that could not be spoken of and skills that could not be advertised. When people ask why I set my mysteries in these particular years, this is kind of thing a large part of the answer: it is a world in which any quiet man at the end of the bar might have taken Riga, or marched through the Brandenburg Gate behind a death's head, and in which some of them, assuredly, were still taking orders from somebody.

The next Alaric von TreLOW novel walks directly into that world, into the weeks after the collapse of the Kapp Putsch, when the brigades had marched out singing and left behind piles of bodies. One of those piles of bodies has one too many men in it. The book is called *Body Number Ten*, and it arrives 1st October.

Until then, if you are new here: the novels begin with *Prussian Blue*, the whole series is available through Kindle Unlimited, and there is a free story waiting at <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/3632y4j3jf>, which will also get you access to The Alaric von TreLOW Casebook, where the real history behind the fiction and the process of writing these stories gets the fuller treatment every month.