

Arnold Brecht on the Kapp Putsch in 1920 (Retrospective Account, 1966)

Abstract

As part of the demobilization of the army stipulated by the Treaty of Versailles, the Allies pressed Germany to disband the Free Corps [*Freikorps*]. General Walther von Lüttwitz – head of Reichswehr Group Command I in Berlin, which oversaw two Reichswehr divisions as well as several Free Corps units – seized the opportunity and staged a putsch that had been planned long in advance with Wolfgang Kapp, general director of the East Prussian agricultural credit banks. On Lüttwitz's orders, the Erhardt Naval Brigade marched on Berlin, where, on March 13, 1920, Kapp proclaimed himself both Reich Chancellor and Prussian Minister-President and appointed Lüttwitz minister and commander-in-chief of the Reichswehr. But after a general strike broke out on March 15, 1920 and the ministerial bureaucracy refused to obey the putschists' orders, Lüttwitz and Kapp were forced to abandon their undertaking on March 17, 1920. In major industrial areas, strikes continued and were only suppressed through the deployment of troops. In order to assert their political demands, the trade unions and the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany also maintained the strike until March 22, 1920, ultimately weakening the democratic government. On the whole, the Kapp Putsch revealed the dubious loyalties of the Reichswehr.

Arnold Brecht (1884-1977) was a high-ranking civil servant and one of the few members of the social elite to defend the young German democracy. A few days after Hitler came to power, he was dismissed from the civil service and in November 1933 he emigrated to the United States, where he taught at the New School for Social Research in New York. This excerpt from the first volume of his memoirs describes the events of the Kapp Putsch of March 1920.

Source

During the night of March 12/13 I was phoned in Steglitz at 3 a.m. from the Chancellery with the instruction that I should come to an impromptu Cabinet Meeting. When I arrived, the meeting had just ended. Ebert and the ministers were coming down the stairs from the first floor. They had received news during the night that Ehrhardt's brigade was marching on Berlin. Two generals, sent by Noske to meet them, had brought back an ultimatum. When Noske asked the generals assembled around him to take military action, they had—with the single exception of General Reinhardt—advised against it, the reason being given by General von Seeckt: "The German army does not shoot at the German army" (*Reichswehr schießt nicht auf Reichswehr*). At 7 a.m., if the ultimatum was not accepted, the rebels had said they would march in. Noske was willing to lie in waiting in the Tiergarten Park with a company and machine guns and start shooting when the rebels advanced, convinced that the whole nuisance would then be over. But the Cabinet had decided to withdraw to Dresden, so that they would not be taken prisoners and thus put out of action.

I was at first to remain behind with State Secretary Albert. Ulrich Rauscher, the government's press chief, in leaving the building with Ebert and the ministers, handed me a call for a general strike, at the bottom of which were, in his handwriting, the names of the Social Democrat members of the government, and asked me to pass it on to the press. I did so, and went to my office room.

Meantime the day began to dawn. It was a strangely ghostlike situation. I considered what I might do. I remembered how bare the first decrees of the People's Commissaries after the Revolution had looked

without an authoritative official stamp. I therefore had all the metal stamps of the Chancellery brought to me and put them in my overcoat, in order to send them later to my brother Gustav's apartment. At 6:30 am I phoned him. "Good morning, Gustav. I am at the Chancellery. In half an hour a putsch is going to take place. The ministers have left Berlin to organize resistance from outside. A call for a general strike has gone out. What would you do in my place during the next half hour?" He answered: "I don't know what you can do. But I do know what I'll do. I shall fill our bathtub with water." He knew from previous experience that the most unpleasant aspect of a strike was the breakdown of the water supply. [...]

Another series of operetta-like situations followed. At seven three men entered the entrance hall. State Secretary Albert went to them. They asked him: "Are you the former State Secretary to the Chancellery?" He answered: "I am indeed the State Secretary to the Chancellery, not the former one, but the present one." He recommended that they take off their hats. One of them said apologetically they had thought this was only an anteroom. Albert still advised them to take off their hats, and they did. He recognized one of them, Herr von Falkenhausen. "We know each other," he said. There was a moment of silent consideration as to whether they ought under such circumstances to shake hands. They did not. Herr von Falkenhausen introduced the other two: Herr Kapp and Herr von Jagow, last imperial police-president of Berlin. Albert turned his back on them and went out through the garden to his residence, where we had agreed to meet later.

After a time another man with two soldiers carrying hand grenades came into my room. He asked: "Are you willing to work for the Chancellor?" I said, "I already do that." He looked at me, frowning: "I don't mean for the former Chancellor, but for Chancellor Kapp." I replied, "I know only Chancellor Bauer." He: "He has been deposed." I: "According to the Constitution he is the Chancellor. I have sworn an oath to uphold the Constitution, and I do not carry my oath in my hand as your men their hand grenades." He: "You also swore an oath to the Kaiser, yet worked for Ebert. So now you can work for us." I: "This error will be fatal for you. At that time the constitutional Chancellor, Prince Max, told us to work for Ebert just as we had worked for him. Ebert and Bauer have not asked me to work for you—quite the contrary." I put on my coat with the stamps in the pocket and left the building.

On the way to Potsdam Square I met the usual morning stream of men and women hurrying to work, still ignorant of what had happened. After discussing matters with Albert and other colleagues, I went home, packed a few things in a bag, and drove to the Anhalt station, the only one, strangely enough, which had not yet been taken over by the rebels, and got onto a train to Dresden. There I found Ebert, Noske, and other ministers in conference with General Mörcker, regional commander. Although Mörcker was not willing to work with Kapp, he was not prepared to back Ebert unconditionally. He offered his services to negotiate with Kapp, but Ebert refused to give him official authority to do this.

Due to Mörcker's equivocal position, the situation in Dresden did not seem sufficiently secure. It was therefore decided to move on to Stuttgart. We traveled by night on the scheduled train, sleeping in our seats as best we could. Since the train went to Munich we had to change early in the morning and wait for the train to Stuttgart. While we were sipping coffee in the station restaurant, someone said it would be fitting if a military unit were to receive us in Stuttgart, if possible with music. This suggestion was passed on to Stuttgart by telegram. Then someone asked: "Are we sure that the Stuttgart military units are loyal? That they won't simply take us prisoner—and on our own orders to meet us?" The telegram was canceled. We were met by the heads of the Württemberg state government without the military and music, but learned that the army in Stuttgart had remained loyal. State and city government did everything possible to ensure a pleasant stay. Cabinet meetings were held in the New Palace. I organized a sort of Chancellery and took part in the meetings.

There were three main problems to be solved: first, finding out which military units in Germany had remained loyal, which had gone over to Kapp, and which were wavering, and how they could be kept on our side; second, deciding whether we ought to negotiate with Kapp and whether the attempts being

made in Berlin by Minister Eugen Schiffer—a Democrat, who had stayed behind—to persuade Kapp to step down by making certain concessions to him, ought to be approved; and third, bringing the struggles which had flared up, especially on the Ruhr, between Communists and the army, to an end. All ministers agreed that there should be no negotiations with Kapp. In the Ruhr area Severing, who had been appointed Federal and Prussian State Commissioner, attempted to gain control of the situation.

Otto Meissner, who had just begun work in President Ebert's office and at first stayed behind in Berlin, joined us a few days later in Stuttgart. In order to get through with his official car, he had taken the precaution of obtaining letters of recommendation from both sides, producing either the one or the other, according to whether his car was stopped by supporters or opponents of the government. He once had the misfortune to submit his Kapp documents to the Communists. Only after long discussions did they let him go on.

After a few days Kapp had to admit defeat. The quick collapse of his putsch was due in equal measure to the shallowness of the whole venture, the resistance of the working classes, and the loyalty of most state secretaries in the federal and state ministries. These officials were not faced with the dilemma, as they were twelve years later under Papen's and Hitler's regimes, that the constitutional President himself had appointed the new Chancellor. On the contrary, the Kapp putsch was directed *against* the constitutional President. In both situations the majority of ministerial officials supported the President. In both the personal disparagement of the democratic ministers had found little response among senior officials, except in the case of Erzberger. Ebert, Noske, Otto Braun, Severing, and most of the other Federal and Prussian ministers rather enjoyed considerable personal prestige.

Source: Arnold Brecht, *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht, An Autobiography 1884–1970*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 180–83.

Source of original German text: Arnold Brecht, *Aus Nächster Nähe, Lebenserinnerungen 1884–1927*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966, pp. 302–07.

Recommended Citation: Arnold Brecht on the Kapp Putsch in 1920 (Retrospective Account, 1966), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-3832>> [March 16, 2026].