

Käthe Kollwitz on the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch (1920)

Abstract

By early 1920, with the Versailles Treaty now officially in force, the Allies ramped up their pressure on Germany to comply with the stipulated military reductions. These included disbanding the *Freikorps*, which were independent units of demobilized soldiers that had formed just after the war around a shared hostility toward the revolution. The *Freikorps* perpetrated horrible acts of violence against far-left groups in early 1919, but their actions had hitherto enjoyed tacit support from the moderate center-left SPD government because they had helped to maintain order.

The government's efforts to dissolve the *Freikorps* provoked one of its most far-right units to attempt a violent overthrow of that democratically elected government on March 13, 1920, in what became known as the Kapp Putsch. By promising to defy the Versailles Treaty, the putsch gained tacit support from the German army, which meant that the institution created to protect the state failed to do so. Government ministers managed to evade capture, however, and to rally broad German support for protecting the Republic by engaging in an immediate nationwide general strike to undermine the putschists. Over the next three days, more than 12 million workers nationwide walked off their jobs, and the bureaucracy refused to implement any of the putschists' directives.

By March 17, the Kapp Putsch had collapsed utterly, but the government now had to convince striking workers to return to their jobs, and those workers wanted additional changes. These included the removal of the Defense Minister, Gustav Noske, who had incurred the wrath of many workers for his willingness to use *Freikorps* units to crush perceived threats from the far left prior to the putsch attempt. Noske bowed to pressure and resigned on March 22, but some striking workers—especially in the industrial Ruhr region in western Germany, but also in working-class districts of Berlin—pressed for a sweeping revision of government. Self-organized workers' militias in the Ruhr region, dubbed the "Red Army of the Ruhr" ("Rote Ruhrarmee") even seized control in a number of localities, including Dortmund and Essen, in their drive to instigate a larger revolution in what became known as the "Ruhr Uprising" ("Ruhraufstand"). [See the photo, "'Angehörige der 'Roten Ruhrarmee,'""] In a dizzying turn of events, the SPD government now turned against many of the very same workers whose general strike had just saved it from violent overthrow. Perceiving the revolutionary demands coming from the remaining strikers as a threat to its legitimate authority, the government now deployed the army and even—in a few instances—*Freikorps* units to end the resistance.

In her diary entries from March 1920, the artist Käthe Kollwitz, who lived in a working-class neighborhood of Berlin, described her anxiousness and uncertainty. Rumors swirled, and she made note of the competing reports about negotiations between the various political parties. She feared early on that her only remaining child, Hans, would join in violent resistance to the putsch, and she continually endured the disruptions in food, water, and electricity caused by the general strike. Kollwitz captured unexpected contrasts in the city, too, as when she and her husband turned around at a barbed-wire barrier and then found themselves in the midst of peacefully strolling pedestrians and playing children.

Throughout these weeks, Kollwitz noted the competing interests of the center-left SPD and the two parties even further to its left, the USPD and the far-left KPD. Although the SPD and USPD initially managed to unite behind their common goal of thwarting the putsch, their aims diverged again once that had been achieved. While the SPD moved quickly to reinstate the constitutional democracy, the USPD and KPD focused their efforts on pushing for a revolutionary transformation of the economic and political system.

Finally, these passages reveal Kollwitz's sense that she was living in an historic moment that she needed to chronicle and wanted to understand. To do so, she sometimes turned to historical analogies. On the first day of the Kapp Putsch, for instance, Kollwitz refers to "the turbulent month" of March returning again, an allusion to the revolutionary events of March 1848 that marked Germans' first effort to create a democracy. A few days later, Kollwitz spent time reading a history of the French Revolution by the anarchist writer Peter Kropotkin. This book appears in many passages of Kollwitz's diary, serving as a steady companion to her during the early years of the Weimar Republic. Kollwitz saw many parallels between the events of late-18th-century Paris and those that were transpiring all around her, and what she saw as the tendency toward violence in both cases gave her no comfort.

Source

March 13, 1920

Now the counter-revolution has begun. This morning, troops loyal to the king marched into Döberitz with black-white-red flags. The government has fled, public buildings have been occupied, and *Vorwärts* and *Freiheit*^[1] have been banned. People are standing together in packs on the streets, everyone seems stunned.

What will happen now?

March again, that restless month!

[...]

Sunday, March 14, 1920

The majority [Social Democrats] and the Independent Social Democrats have joined forces. General strike.

March 17, 1920

Wednesday. Today is the third day of the general strike. Berlin is completely cut off. In the western districts, there is electric light thanks to the technical emergency aid (schoolchildren, students). Here, it is completely dark at night. A darkness like in the countryside. Jet black. But it is strange to hear the resounding footsteps of people on the asphalt. During the actual night, it is both quiet and dark. Otty Ehlers was with us last night. She came by bike with Hans^[2] and brought a liter of petroleum. Hans is in the city a lot. Last night he brought good news that the new government was collapsing and that a coalition government was expected.

But Karl^[3] had bad news from a reliable source. The SPD and USPD are falling apart again. The Independents do not want to miss this last opportunity to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat. They are armed and want to take up the fight. The SPD is against the dictatorship and therefore against the Independents. Now, I fear, terrible fratricidal struggles may and will occur.

When I heard this, it weighed on my chest like lead, terribly heavy.

This morning I told Hans this news. I asked him to act wisely. To examine himself very carefully to see whether he could take responsibility for the consequences of the actions of the Independents. To remain true to his once-expressed principle that the use of force is evil.

The real reason why I spoke in this way was, of course, concern for his life. That he could decide in such a way that we would lose him too.

In the evening, Hans, who has been out on his bike all day, brings the news that the Independents are said to have stormed a Spandau barracks and are on the march, heavily armed. Karl confirms the same thing that evening.

Vienna and Vilnius are said to have a soviet republic, as are some German cities.

March 18, 1920

[...]

Windy, damp, mild March weather.

The first special edition [of the newspaper] in the morning. The old government is returning to Berlin, Kapp and Lüttwitz are finished. The old government has made the following concessions:

1. new elections to the National Assembly within two months
2. direct election of the president by the people
3. reorganization of the government.

This is the compromise between the old and new governments. Now we'll see what the Independents have to say about it.

Hans goes into town early by bike, Karl is busy. A day that drags on for me. Especially in the evening when it was dark and I sat with my mother by the one lamp and she talked for hours about her fantasies.^[4] It was almost eerily isolated. Then Frau Sonnewald came home and brought a fresh face and laughter with her. And an hour later Hans came and then Karl. Thank God—I was alive again.

Hans brought the news that the majority government was thinking of uniting with all right-wing parties against the left. That's crazy. Because Karl says that the mood among the majority comrades has become much more radical, and that any action against the Independents would be rejected. The trade unions are demanding a purely socialist government. A say in the choice of ministers and the disarmament of the Baltic troops.^[5]

Thus a rift has opened up between most of the majority socialists and their government. The latter is said to have rejected a merger with the USPD, despite the fact that the USPD is said to have agreed to temporarily refrain from introducing a council constitution.

The fear of the Red Army marching in from Spandau is so great that the bourgeois parties are turning to the majority socialists again and, in order not to give up control, they are declaring themselves against the radicals.

The Baltic troops have withdrawn to Döberitz but have not been disarmed. As they withdrew, they fired into the crowd and shouted abuse at them in several places in Berlin.

I am reading Kropotkin's "French Revolution" and am amazed at the parallels now. The Gironde in its entire behavior corresponds perfectly to the majority socialists. The Independents correspond to the left-wing group of the Convention. Then there is the great mass of people pushing forward, with the "enragés", the rabble-rousers who plunge back into the darkness, who always stir things up and keep the revolutionary fire alive.

March 19, 1920

Hans has only just cycled into town at midday. It is said that Noske has been dismissed. That would be a matter of course.

Accompanied Karl on his rounds. There is great unrest in the streets. Small posters have been stuck up everywhere by the Independents and Communists: a call for the immediate formation of revolutionary workers' councils. In response, a very sensible leaflet has been issued by the district leadership of the SPD. It warns against the hasty step of establishing a soviet-style republic but calls for a more radical government.

When I get home, I find Hans and Otty. Hans is bringing food for Karl's poorest patients, donated by the Quakers, and Otty is going to collect dirty laundry in Friedenau on behalf of the Quakers.

Hans tells me that there is great excitement in the city center. He got caught in two shootouts.

March 20, 1920

[...]

Politically, the left-wing parties have been given a lot of concessions. A purely socialist government is to

be formed, and the troops are to be disarmed. The workers are incredulous and refuse to end the strike. Today is the first day of a week-long general strike. At night, heavy guns can be heard from far away. Closer by, machine guns can also be heard. Yesterday, there was terrible and brutal shooting at Alexanderplatz.

The increase in food shortages is not even calculable. Karl is completely desperate about what this will do to the children. Our pump at Wörther Platz is empty, and if the neighboring pumps are the same, we will soon have no water.

[...]

Sunday, March 21st, 1920

The strike continues. The left-wing socialist parties want to keep it up until a council constitution is implemented.

In the afternoon, Hans goes to Ehlers' to pick up the food supplies he bought. Karl and I go into town. We turn back at the wire fences of Hackescher Markt. The streets are full of peaceful strollers and playing children. It is beautiful but still harsh spring weather.

Monday, March 22, 1920

[...]

The strike continues. It has been a full week since the general strike began. For all of the working class districts, this means no light, no water (except for the pumps, which are gradually failing), no coal, no transportation, no vegetables. I don't know what the situation is with milk. Bread is still being baked for the time being, and although there are no fresh vegetables, there are still salted vegetables. When I was standing in line for bread today, I heard the women talking to each other. One of them came by and said, "You have it good, you're standing in the sun!" to which a woman standing next to me replied, "But that's all we have."

[...]

Late March 1920

The strike is called off. The goal has been reached. The Kapp government is finished. A new cabinet has been chosen, a coalition cabinet. The Independents and communists are grumbling. A strike is looming again.

Palm Sunday 1920 [March 28, 1920]

There was a big unification meeting at the Busch Circus today. I couldn't get in. Karl managed to get in towards the end. He said that there was not much talk of unification. Katzenstein^[6] spoke very clumsily and caused a great commotion.

[...]

When the strike had been ended successfully but the streets were still without lighting, I stood with Hans at the open window one evening. Below, deep darkness—above the houses, a starry sky and the white crescent moon. Below, in the darkness, you could hear the sound of many people's footsteps. Young voices sang triumphantly: "These are the working men—the proletariat!" – It was beautiful.

[...]

Good Friday 1920 [April 2, 1920]

[...]

In the evening, I was at a meeting called by Karl Hiller, where the founding of a new non-partisan party was discussed. There are intelligent people there. We like Deri best.[7] They all agree that it is necessary to work for socialism within the framework of one of the major parties, and that the implementation of socialism is the be-all and end-all. He speaks well, he has improved a lot in public speaking. I am very happy about that.

[...]

May 1, 1920

Cool, clear, windy, sunny weather.

World Holiday! When you say this word, you feel elevated.

A self-created holiday celebrated all over the world, that is May 1. Another day of struggle, but also a day of joy, a spring day, a day of reconciliation between nations. And so beautiful that the May Day celebrations go back to pagan times.

I went to the parade ground where the communists were supposed to gather. But there were so few people there that I went to Schwedter Straße to the KAPD.[8] A young man was speaking there. May 1st was not a day of celebration, but a day of remembrance, of oaths, of struggle.

To be a proletarian and to live through this time in the firm, faithful expectation of the communist empire, to know that one's own person is counted and needed, that must give a tremendous feeling of strength. Every socialist has it to a certain extent, but the majority of socialists, with the idea of a gradual transformation of conditions into socialism, have something pallid about them compared to the Independents and above all the communists, who are determined to use all means and who expect the violent change from capitalism to communism at any time.

The *Vorwärts* says:

“This is the day made by the people

It will be remembered throughout the world.”

But I saw a gruesome farce: two invalids—war invalids?—were pushing a barrel organ in front of them. One of them, a horribly ugly and miserable person, always played the Internationale on it, while the other, even younger and also looking miserable, in a gray uniform coat with a top hat, went around as a kind of clown and collected money. Both had decorated themselves with red flowers behind their ears and [on their] hats and canes. Children surrounded them, shouting hello. They made fun of each other, and in their misery, they looked quite gruesome.

[...]

NOTES

[1] Left-wing newspapers, ed.

[2] Kollwitz' son, ed.

[3] Kollwitz' husband, ed.

[4] Kollwitz's mother had been living with them since 1919 and suffered from dementia, ed.

[5] Forces in support of the putsch, ed.

[6] Simon Katzenstein was an SPD writer and activist, ed.

[7] Kurt Hiller was a prominent socialist and pacifist; Max Deri was an art critic and shared Hiller's pacifist views, ed.

[8] A radically anti-parliamentarian splinter group from the KPD, ed.

Berlin: Wolf Jobst Siedler Verlag, 1989, pp. 457–65, 469-70.

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