

Morgan Philips Price on Workers' Councils and the Kapp Putsch (March-April, 1920)

Abstract

Morgan Philips Price served as the *Daily Herald* correspondent in Germany from 1919 until 1923. He would later become a British politician and member of parliament for the Labour Party. In this report, Price describes conditions in Germany following the Kapp Putsch and the Ruhr Uprising between March and April 1920. 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 Reichswehr 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.

Source

March 18

We are living now in Berlin without light, gas or water. The new Government is caught like a rat in a trap. It is increasingly clear that it is not only up against the Labour, Socialist and Democratic parties, but that large sections of the middle and lower bureaucracy are passively resisting. I hear that yesterday union was attained between the Scheidemann Socialists and the Independents in Berlin, both deciding upon common action against the new regime. A prominent Scheidemann Socialist told me this morning that reversion to the old state of affairs after the overthrow of the Kapp government is impossible. I have just seen a proclamation for a general strike in Silesia signed by middle-class men and Socialists, by Catholic Centrists and Communists. On the other hand, it is not to be expected that the new Government will give up without a struggle, and it has considerable support among the uneducated middle classes and peasantry in Pomerania, North Germany and East Prussia. Anti-Semitic propaganda is a method by which it is trying to make itself popular among the dark and ignorant elements of the population. In the street where I live is a notorious Jew-baiter who has been engaged for some time past in manufacturing rubber batons for use in pogroms.

March 30

This morning the Government issued an ultimatum to the workers of the Ruhr to disarm and dissolve the Worker's Councils within 24 hours. In a speech in the Reichstag today the new War Minister, Gessler, justified this action by alluding to the 'Red Terror' in Duisburg and other Westphalian towns. According, however, to Legien, who spoke on behalf of the All-German Trade Union Executive, the Majority Socialists and Independents of the Ruhr have decided to take joint action against the anarchist and syndicalist

elements who are trying to declare a Soviet Republic there. 'The workers of the Ruhr,' said Legien, who is a most conservative trade union official, 'demand only one thing – the disarming of the Reichswehr and the counter-revolutionary White Guards.' This corresponds with a report I have just received from the Ruhr that the workers of all political parties there will not lay down their arms without absolute guarantees that the Reichswehr and the Security Police [*Sicherheitspolizei*] shall not be sent into the coalfields.

April 6

Information from the Ruhr shows that in most of the towns peace and order reign, but in some parts of the neutral [unoccupied] zone there are irresponsible bands against whom the local Socialists of all shades are taking action. The existence of these bands gives the Junker junta just the excuse it wants to march into the Ruhr. The Berlin government is in a state of helpless indecision and its official spokesmen are making contradictory statements according as they are to a greater or lesser degree under the influence of General von Watter's headquarters. Negotiations with France over the occupation of the neutral zone continue. Already Watter's troops have reached Duisburg and the French government is making use of this advance to secure the right to extend its own area of occupation.

April 15

There has been a steady consolidation of the forces of reaction of Germany during the Kapp week. The people behind the Kapp adventure, though defeated on the surface, have gained below. This is particularly the case in South Germany. In Bavaria even the Majority Socialists have been secluded from the Government, which relies now solely on the parties of the Right. The newly created Bavarian Centre and the Peasants' Party are separatist in tendency and working with Pan-Germans in Prussia, who prefer a small reactionary Germany to a large revolutionary one.

According to my information the centre of the reaction is now Pomerania, which is the spiritual Mecca and Vendée of Junkerdom to which have flocked the leaders of the Kapp adventure, quite undisturbed by orders issued by Hermann Müller's government for their arrest for high treason. The landlords and their retainers here are well armed, and many Baltic regiments are scattered on their estates, the soldiers having brought all their arms with them. There is a strong Socialist and Communist movement among the agricultural labourers of these parts, but as the workers are completely disarmed the whole countryside is at the mercy of the Junkers.

Cologne, April 27

I have just returned from the Ruhr Valley and must state my belief that the Ruhr is ripe for another workers' uprising, better organized, more united and more desperate in character than the one overwhelmed by the Reichswehr. In Münster, Wesel, Dorsten, Essen, Bochum, Dortmund and half a dozen other industrial centres, the machine-guns and bayonets of the Reichswehr maintain a precarious truce. Here and elsewhere the Red Army has ceased to exist as a visible force. But the organization which called it into being in the early days of April is stronger than ever and beyond the reach of the military. In many small towns south of the Ruhr the workers are today practically controlling local government. [...] A central committee, with representatives in all the cities of the Ruhr Valley, is functioning here and biding its time. [...] German military authorities estimate that less than 10 per cent of the weapons in the possession of the workers have been surrendered as the result of the recent fighting. This estimate is substantiated by individual workers, who told me without hesitation that they have rifles secreted. [...] The morale of the Reichswehr in the Westphalian cities is bad. [...] Privates pass their officers in the street without saluting – something almost unbelievable in Germany. A majority of the workers enrolled in the Red Army could not by any stretch of imagination be called Bolsheviks. [...] Captain Otto Schwink, former bridgehead officer at Cologne for the German General Staff, told me that, without doubt, the last

revolution started merely as a working-class protest against the Kapp-Lüttwitz *coup*. Since then, however, sentiment among the Ruhr workers has swung far towards the Left, partly because of the brutality shown by the Reichswehr in putting down the uprising, partly because of the feebleness shown by the Ebert government in resisting the present encroachments from the Right. [...] There is every indication that another Junker *coup* in Germany will bring that country nearer to real Bolshevism than anything so far.

Source: Morgan Philips Price, *Dispatches from the Weimar Republic, Versailles and German Fascism*. London, Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 1999, pp. 72–75.

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