

Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold (1924–1929)

Abstract

For many decades, historians tended to characterize citizens' support for the Weimar Republic as lukewarm, at best, and they often invoked the figure of the "Vernunftrepublikaner," who upheld Germany's democratic constitution for rationally calculated reasons, rather than emotionally stirring ones.

In fact, though, many Germans felt a passionate allegiance to the Weimar Republic, and they founded countless civic associations that gave expression to that allegiance. The *Reichsbanner*—or, by its full official name, the *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, Bund der republikanischen Kriegsteilnehmer*—was one of the largest and most active such organizations. Founded in 1924, it banded together veterans of the First World War to support and defend the republic. Members proclaimed their enthusiasm for a democratic Germany, and at times even an *expansionist*, democratic Germany. Although dominated by the SPD, the *Reichsbanner* attracted members from all of three of the "Weimar Coalition" parties (SPD, Center, DDP) and boasted a peak membership of 900,000, twice that of the next-largest veterans' organization, the racially exclusionist, anti-republican *Stahlhelm*.

The *Reichsbanner* coordinated a number of different programs and activities, including public spectacles to mark key milestones for the republic that drew enthusiastic crowds and some of Germany's leading politicians. It commemorated the tenth anniversary of the Weimar Constitution in August 1929 with a parade and speeches in the heart of Berlin that drew delegations from abroad, too, including Austria and the United States (See the document "Gewaltiger Aufmarsch der Reichsbanner"). The organization regularly honored both the fallen soldiers of the First World War and the fallen politicians of the republic who had died by a far-right assassin's bullet, including Matthias Erzberger and Walther Rathenau.

These documents show that German nationalism was not the exclusive domain of the political right and not inherently antidemocratic, aggressive, or racist. Republicans expressed a German nationalism that was compatible with democracy and coexistence with Germany's neighbors, even as many Republicans advocated revisions to the nation's territorial borders. These documents also illustrate the inclusive understanding of nationhood that the *Reichsbanner* and other republican civic associations affirmed—one that self-evidently included German Jews, Catholics, and socialists within the national community. Such a position stood in stark contrast to organizations on the political right, such as the *Stahlhelm*, which had instituted a so-called "Aryan Paragraph" to its bylaws in 1924 that explicitly excluded Jews from membership.

One of the documents features the speech given by Ludwig Haas in 1925, on the occasion of the *Reichsbanner's* first anniversary. Haas was a leading member of the Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith (Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens), an elected representative in the Reichstag (DDP), a decorated World War I veteran, and a committed German patriot. His closing remarks about an eventual union with Austria also make clear that he, like so many ardent German republicans, was an expansive nationalist as well, but one who insisted that such expansion take place peacefully and under the banner of constitutional democracy.

Source

1. “Veterans, Republicans!” (1924)

Men who have not lost their nerves during the collapse of imperial Germany have founded the German Reich on republican principles, led and liberated by one central idea: despite the defeat in the war, the Reich should not perish, national unity is the first **prerequisite for the nation’s recovery!**

The difficult work has been completed. In Weimar, our people gave themselves a new constitution; but even before the construction upon these foundational walls could proceed, it was raided to hinder its completion. The firebrand of civil war has more than once been thrown against this structure; the architects were threatened with murder—Erzberger, Rathenau, and others fell at the murderers’ hands.

Using the pretense of pursuing national goals, of preserving patriotic sentiments, organizations have formed that split the German people into two opposing camps, that are working to unleash civil war. They include men in their ranks who occupy high, even the highest, offices in the republic, who have taken an oath of loyalty to it and now admit that their entire purpose and aspiration is malice and treason, treason towards the republic, treason towards the German people, whose national unity they seek to destroy.

Thousands of young men have **formed armed militias**, under leaders who boast about having never read the constitution from Weimar, which they fight with fire and the sword. Wrestling with intellectual problems is entirely unknown to them, they are not accustomed to use the weapons of the mind; they are the victims of uncultivated demagogues, who shamelessly abuse the terms fatherland and nation, and hide their own guilt and secret aims **behind disgraceful Jew-baiting.**

We republicans will never forget that Jewish soldiers fought and bled shoulder-to-shoulder with Catholics, Protestants, and free thinkers. The number of Jews who fell and were severely wounded proves it. This idiotic antisemitism, which even poisons the souls of the children, not only makes Germany ridiculous in the eyes of the world, but it is a danger both to domestic and foreign relations.

Veterans, republicans!—The fight for the existence of the German people as a single nation and state is not yet over. Foreign armies are stationed along the Rhine and in the Ruhr district, there is a very real danger that these areas might be lost. Cowardliness, German tribal arrogance, dynastic interests, and the hereditary burden of particularism all contributed to the idea that **giving up a unified state** might lead to economic advantages for individual regions or bring the victors in the World War to tolerate the return of individual monarchs.

There is a considerable danger that the battles sparked by the German nationalists over the form of government could provide nationalists beyond the German borders with a cause to march into Germany and strike the German Reich from the list of states. This may not happen! **Germany may not perish!** It can only persist and gain strength as a republic.

Out of a desire to serve the German republic and to stand by her in all cases of necessity, republican veterans have banded together in more or less formal groups in local towns or districts more than a year ago. Experience had taught that the loose affiliations that had existed among them was insufficient. For this reason the associations of republican veterans came together on February 22, 1924, in Magdeburg to form a national organization of republican veterans, **Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold.**

The federation will not pursue any of its own political or financial goals. The carrying out of these tasks will be left to the republican parties and financial associations appointed for this purpose. The federation is open to any veteran who wants to pledge his heart and hand to the German republic. Communists and monarchists have no place in Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold. The federation will fight nationalist and bolshevik demagoguery by means of explanations and promotion of republican thought. The federation will support all republican institutions in defending the republican constitution against

violent attacks, and it will attack **opponents of the republic** with the same means with which they attack the republic.

In recognition of the fact that only republicans can help the republic gain in power and standing, the federation demands the appointment of republicans to all important offices, especially those of administration, school, justice, defense, and law enforcement.

Veterans, comrades, you who went to battle or came back from the war as republicans, skilled soldiers, and finally all those who are ready to support the aims of our federation: Come join our federation!

The banner of the German republic with the ancient German colors, black, red, gold, is our symbol.

The republic for republicans! – Hooray for the republic! – Hooray for the German people!
Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold

Federation of the republican veterans, registered association, seated in Magdeburg.

Source: “Kriegsteilnehmer, Republikaner!” *Das Reichsbanner*, No. 1, April 15, 1924, p. 1.

2. Speech by Ludwig Haas (1925)

[...]

Then the Democratic Representative Haas came to the podium. The German republic is in peril, and the republicans are engaged in fierce battles. And yet, despite all our worries, we may celebrate this day of the Reichsbanner as a day to honor republicans and the republic. Our comrade [Otto] Hörsing has the right to view it as his day of honor. We have much for which to thank him. We remember the way he fought fiercely for the German cause in Upper Silesia. We are especially grateful that he called on us as republicans to fight to defend the republic. He spoke that which filled the hearts of hundreds of thousands of republicans. The others may fight and defame us, but we are strong enough to protect the republic.

But now we have every reason to ask if it is really still advisable for the reactionaries to topple the republic? Would they not prefer to shape the republic in such a way that it is no longer a republic of the people but rather of the old, privileged classes of the monarchical authoritarian state? If they were to succeed at this, then they would certainly be satisfied with the republic. But even then they would need something, namely, a spirit of servility like that which was cultivated by centuries of particularism and persists among workers' circles even today. Those who share this spirit of servility can neither understand nor serve the republic. Herein lies our greatest task as the Reichsbanner, to foster a democracy of the heart among the German people that will fill the state with an inner democratic life, with a true republican spirit. Every citizen must understand, not only with the mind, but also with the heart, that there are no differences of class and birth, and that each and every honest labor is worthy of respect. Sadly, this self-evident truth is not understood among some workers' circles. As can often be observed, the very circles which have nominated a leader from their midst then fail to show him the necessary respect or to recognize his authority. This strengthens the reactionaries in the battle to eliminate the republicans.

The associations of the radical right have propagated the lie among the people that they alone love the fatherland and are truly patriotic. How deprived and small Germany would be, if only they loved the fatherland. We republicans love our fatherland at least as much. Our love for the fatherland is a matter of the heart, even more, it compels our intention to use everything at our disposal to save our people. We know that there can only be a German future on the foundation of the republic. Because we love our fatherland, we are republicans. We proclaim proudly: the fatherland is the republic!

And one more: no one can steal our faith that Germany and Austria will one day be reunited under the colors black, red, gold.

[...]

Source: Speech by Ludwig Haas, reprinted in: “Trommelschlag und Hörnerklang,” *Das Reichsbanner*, No. 5, March 1, 1925, 2nd supplement, p. 10–11.

3. “Colossal Parade of the Reichsbanner” (1929)

Honoring the Fallen – The Determination of the Reichsbanner

Berlin’s magnificent avenue Unter den Linden was showing itself at its best yet again this Sunday. All the parades and mass demonstrations that had filled this street in the last decade fade in comparison with the parade that the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold put together this time. If ever, the Reichsbanner have conquered Berlin and the Berliners with this display.

By ten in the morning, Linden and Lustgarten were lively. The cops were busy— not with directing traffic, but with preparing for the following hours. The police officers strung up thick ropes from tree to tree all along the Linden to facilitate blocking the streets for the anticipated hordes to march by. Despite the throngs of people who filled the streets in dense rows between the ropes and the buildings, there were no serious incidents anywhere: the audience behaved impeccably, rejoicing in the colorful spectacle and music as it was offered, and the half dozen protesters who had taken up positions near the Russian embassy could not disturb the peace.

Unter den Linden displayed a pleasing abundance of flag decorations. All the large hotels had hung out flags: the French embassy was flying the tricolor, the Union Jack waved over the British embassy in the Wilhelmstraße, and the Russian embassy had hoisted the Soviet flag with its hammer and sickle. The travel agencies had put up the flags of their homelands. The somber memorial^[1] on Pariser Platz rose powerfully over the event with its three towers in the colors of the Reich. The front of the opera house was decorated with flags, the estrade was decorated with blue hydrangeas, and along the railings there were green festoons wrapped with colored ribbons up to the flowery decorations on the corner posts. The large viewing stand, framed with flags, bore a large inscription of three words: UNITY, LIBERTY, FATHERLAND.

The leaders of the Reichsbanner squads assembled already at 10:30 in the Lustgarten. Here there was a stage on the palace terrace, behind the group of Urania, from which cables ran to various speakers spread throughout the Lustgarten. From 10:30 to 11 o’clock, the first thousands of the Reichsbanner members gathered. The first were the youth groups who came marching out of the celebration in the packed Circus Busch. While they were lining up, several hundred members of the national league of republican motorcyclists arrived from their demonstration procession. The central federation’s leaders assembled on the terrace, and the deputies of the Reichsbanner groups from the occupied territories of the Palatinate, Saarland, and further from Danzig, and the Austrian guests took up their places in front of the terrace. Two banners, placed directly before the speaker, were still shrouded. They were to be unveiled today, on this so meaningful occasion.

The speaker’s platform was flanked by the banner of the federation’s leadership and the banner of the Berlin-Brandenburg district. When the federal chairman, [Otto] Hörsing, took the stage and spoke his first words, the entire area of the Lustgarten became quiet. The leader’s voice could be heard everywhere as he, on behalf of the federation’s leadership, welcomed all the comrades, especially those from Vienna and German Austria. “Who can,” President Hörsing asked, “imagine such a great display of the Reichsbanner without our friends from Vienna. Let us hope that the invitations and visits will soon be over, that the border between Germany and Austria will soon disappear, and that we will have one

shared German Reich.”

Today, on the tenth anniversary of the republic, we remember more than ever those who fought and struggled with us, all those comrades who went into battle with us and did not return, who fell on the battlefield or died as prisoners of war. The number of victims who have fallen in the struggle to maintain our republic is immense. Let us take a moment to reflect at the graves of Ebert, Erzberger, and Rathenau (all those present bared their heads, the flags were lowered to respect the dead) and all the many graves of our comrades who fell in battle for the republic, mostly the victims of cowardly murderers on the right and left.

In the ten years' of the republic's existence, much has been accomplished. If the republicans in general have cause to celebrate today, it is the members of the Reichsbanner more than all others who have reason to celebrate this day in the truest sense of the word. The fact that this day can be celebrated at all is our doing, is to our credit, as is recognized and which we will let no one deny. And so today we celebrate the tenth anniversary of the German republic and its constitution and the fifth anniversary of the day on which we publicly stepped forward for the republic, the constitution, and its colors, and began this successful fight.

The republic can no longer allow the national socialists and communists to brutally beat down everything with which they disagree. The political atmosphere within Germany must be sanitized immediately. We cannot, therefore, advise the government strongly enough to visibly raise Germany's prestige by putting an end to the hooliganism of the national socialists and communists. If the national socialists and the others seeking to undo the Reich do not soon abandon their senseless struggle, it could happen that we use the same methods and means as defense to subdue them that they believe they are allowed to use to attack and fight us. I say this fully intentionally, for we want to leave no one doubting that we have had enough once and for all of the senseless agitation of those on the right and the left.

The republic will stand firm as long as the Reichsbanner steadfastly and resolutely stands firm, and the republic will quickly begin to waver if the Reichsbanner subsides in its fight or even ceases to exist altogether. It has been and remains our goal to develop the republic into the consummate people's state. This work begins anew. We are entering the second decade of the German republic. And it will see us fighting at the forefront for the republic against the enemies! We will not stop agitating, organizing, strengthening and disciplining our ranks, and doing all we can to be ever ready and armed. It is, as it was. We do not exist for our own sake, our task is still as it has ever been to support not only the republican institutions of government but also the republican parties and unions. For their battles are our battles, and our battles are their battles! The speaker closed: “Three cheers for our fatherland, our people, the German republic!”

The cheers were taken up by the tens of thousands who had gathered in the Lustgarten, and they spread from there far into [illegible]. They were greeted everywhere.

In the meantime, every last corner of the rectangular Lustgarten had been filled. It was an indescribably colorful scene, the likes of which had never before been reached at a mass demonstration. The Reichsbanner Youth, the athletes of all disciplines in their outfits, in colorful jackets and shirts, sailors and scouts in yellow, brown, and blue shirts, and then the many shades of German and Austrian uniforms, and over it all the thousands of banners and flags with their shiny buttons and the picturesque colors black, red, gold, against the background of the green of the leaves and the lawns. And over it all stretched the vault of the blue sky, enlivened by an artistic squadron of Sturmvogel planes that circled the inner city.

Hörsing's speech had just barely ended when one of these airplanes released a smoke bomb, which was the signal for the constitutional relay race in which the sport youth of the Reichsbanner ran up and down

the avenue [*Unter den Linden*]. That was a nice start. It created a festive mood, for the fresh boys gave it all they had to be the first to arrive at the stand for the guests of honor.

In the meantime, the procession had assembled in the Lustgarten with musicians at the front, then the federation's banner, followed by the federation's leaders, with Hörsing in the front. Behind the leaders there was the first surprise: a group of young people who carried an American flag at the front. It was a delegation of the Reichsbanner groups in New York and Chicago. They were greeted everywhere.

The parade went from Lustgarten over the palace bridge to pass close by crowded rows of many thousand cheering people who had quite the experience with the appearance of the Reichsbanner and the impressive parade. It went up the Linden to Pariser Platz. Shortly before the square, the musicians fell silent, the rapid steps slowed, as a somber procession it passed the striking memorial—and each devoted a few minutes of silent thought to the names of those who have fallen for liberty and justice. Then after turning back, this time into the south side of the Linden avenue, the marching music resumed, and the parade proceeded quickly to the platform on Opernplatz. In front of the platform there was a smaller stage for the leaders, who were observing the passing march from there: Hörsing, Scheidemann, General von Deimling, and later, when the Austrians were passing, Reichstag President Löbe, whom the assembled guests cheered with gusto.

Only here from the platform was it possible to now see just how impressive the masses the Reichsbanner had assembled were. Just the sport groups, the sailors, the athletes, the tennis players, the skiers (without skis, but with their poles in their hands), the rowers, with their oars on their shoulders, the motorcyclists and automobilists, needed a considerable time to march past. Only then came the active members of the Reichsbanner. Here were greeted the soldiers from the Palatinate, who carried the old banner from the Hambach Festival, then the comrades from the Saarland, then the mighty group of East Prussians.

And so on, to mention just a few from the endless rows, the scouts and the Young Workers in their blue shirts. Widely noticed were the old flags from 1848 that the East Prussians carried and also the old democratic flags in possession of those from Westphalia. But the oldest flag was that of a group from Groß Breitenbach in Thuringia: it carried the year 1813, when it had served as the symbol for a citizens' militia. The groups marched by unceasingly: dozens of marching bands, fife and drum corps, and shawm groups had already passed the viewing stand.

Suddenly, from far away along the Linden, rose up a steady, deafening cheer, cries of hip-hip hooray surged along the street, handkerchiefs and hands were waving, as far as one could see: the Austrians were coming. One has to admit that they simply know how to present themselves well. Just the two young men in the front, who cut a fine figure in their blue jackets and carried the huge flags, the German banner and that of the brotherland—white, red, white. And then came the German-Austrian Schutzbund with a marching band at the front, and one that played the kinds of marches that one played and still plays in Vienna. And then briskly and light of step the members of the Schutzbund, and then another marching band, and the railway men and more bands and more bands and more than half a dozen. And everywhere the flags and the cheers—it was a tremendous celebration, and the passing of the Austrians was the highlight of it all!

NOTES

[1] A temporary memorial erected in honor of those who had fallen in World War I and in service to the republic.

Source of original German text: “Gewaltiger Aufmarsch des Reichsbanners,” *Berliner Montagspost*, No. 30, August 12, 1929, 1st supplement, p. 1.

Translation: Ellen Yutzy Glebe

Recommended Citation: Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold (1924–1929), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-5381>> [March 16, 2026].