

The Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch: Soldiers on Wilhelmplatz in Berlin (March 1920)

Abstract

According to the Treaty of Versailles, the German army was to be reduced to 100,000 professional soldiers and the Freikorps disbanded. Accordingly, hatred of the government that had signed the treaty smoldered among both officers and soldiers. The Freikorps, in particular, which Reichswehr Minister Noske had deployed shortly beforehand to crush radical left-wing revolutionaries, opposed its dissolution. They included the openly anti-republican naval brigade under the command of Corvette Captain Hermann Ehrhardt, which consisted of around 5,000 soldiers who wore swastikas on their steel helmets and refused to fly the flag of the republic. Noske ordered its dissolution on February 29, 1920, but General Walther von Lüttwitz (1859-1942), General of the Reichswehr Group Command, defied the order. He also refused to support the government, demanded the immediate dissolution of the National Assembly and new elections as well as his appointment as commander-in-chief of the Reichswehr. When the Reichswehr refused to act against the anti-government troops in the event of a putsch, Ebert decided to leave for Dresden with the majority of his cabinet. On the morning of March 13, shortly after the government had left the capital, the Ehrhardt Marine Brigade marched into Berlin and occupied the government district. Wolfgang Kapp (1868-1922), the East Prussian right-wing conservative leader of the German National People's Party (DNVP), declared the government deposed and appointed himself the new Reich Chancellor. He appointed his co-conspirator Lüttwitz as Reichswehr Minister and Commander-in-Chief. General Erich Ludendorff was one of the high-ranking military officers who supported the coup. However, the coup failed due to the opposition of the Berlin ministry officials on the one hand, who remained loyal to the legitimate government, and that of the workers on the other, as the trade unions called a general strike and thus paralyzed the city. On March 15, traffic and public life in Berlin came to a standstill, and electricity, gas and water lines were out of order. The Reichsbank also refused to make payments to the putschists. On March 17, the putschists capitulated, Kapp and Lüttwitz resigned and then went abroad. Only one of the putschists, Traugott von Jagelow, who was appointed Minister of the Interior by Kapp, later had to stand trial and was released from prison after a few years. The trade unions, which had gained political self-confidence through their decisive role in thwarting the putsch, demanded the resignation of Gustav Noske as Reichswehr Minister, as he had failed to put a stop to the reactionary tendencies within the Reichswehr. On March 22, Friedrich Ebert resigned and was replaced by Otto Geßler (DDP). In addition, General Hans von Seeckt became the new head of the army command.

Source



Source: Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch: Soldiers at Wilhelmplatz in Berlin, March 1920. Photographer: Unknown. BA, ADN Zentralbild, image 183-J0305-0600-003, available online on Wikimedia Commons:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_183-J0305-0600-003,_Berlin,_Kapp-Putsch,_Putschisten.jpg

Bundesarchiv

Recommended Citation: The Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch: Soldiers on Wilhelmplatz in Berlin (March 1920), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:image-3997>> [March 16, 2026].