

Wilhelm Groener on the Ebert-Groener Pact (published posthumously, 1957)

Abstract

In this excerpt from his posthumously published memoirs, Wilhelm Groener (1867-1939) describes his view of the “Ebert-Groener Pact” between him as Commander-in-Chief of the Supreme Army Command (OHL) and the SPD chairman Friedrich Ebert, who was also co-chairman of the Council of People’s Representatives. These were agreements made in secret telephone calls between Ebert in Berlin and Groener at the Supreme Army Command headquarters, initially in Spa (Belgium) and from November 15, 1918, at Wilhelmshöhe Palace near Kassel. The agreement first became known in 1925 through Groener’s testimony in a Munich court trial about the “stab-in-the-back” myth [*Dolchstoßlegende*]. The support of the Reichswehr for the new Social Democratic government came about in order to fight the radical left-wing groups that tried to establish a soviet-style council republic during the November 1918/1919 revolution. Ebert hoped to prevent a civil war and stabilize the new republic by reigning in the radical leftists. Both the new government and the old elites also tried to bring back and demobilize as quickly as possible all troops still outside Germany, as this was one of the conditions of the armistice with the Allies. However, the bloody suppression of the revolutionaries by the Reichswehr permanently poisoned relations between the Social Democrats and the radical left. Equally problematic was the fact that anti-republican and right-wing elements continued to prevail within the Reichswehr, as was to become apparent a year later during the Kapp Putsch.

Source

[...]

In the first days after my arrival in Wilhelmshöhe I had a conversation one night in the house of Oberpräsident v. Windheim with the president of the Reichstag Fehrenbach, whom I had asked to confer with the military leadership. I asked him whether he was in a position to convene the Reichstag so that at least *one* legal institution was present to bring the moderate votes to bear against the radicals. We were naturally not thinking of Berlin as the venue, but would have preferred Kassel, where we could also have summoned Ebert in case of success. Fehrenbach, however, declared any involvement of the Reichstag to be impossible; there was at most a rump parliament and he feared that not even the right-wing parties would show up. The Reichstag was simply an exhausted instrument.

Thus we had to direct all our attention toward the returning army and how it could be deployed against the revolution — i.e. against the dangers represented by the Independents and the Spartacists.

In the very first days after November 9–10, we in the O.H.L. [Supreme Army Command] nurtured a dream where we had enough reliable troops to build up border protection along the Rhine. This hope proved illusory. The troops marching back in perfect order remained in the hands of their leaders until the point when they entered the revolutionary atmosphere on the Rhine; from then on there was no stopping them. The “inoculators,” sent out to the march routes by the army leadership, efficient, capable officers who were supposed to inoculate the troops against the spirit of the revolution, met with little success. There were regiments that planned during the return march to eliminate the revolutionaries, especially the sailors, as soon as they returned to their garrisons. Once in the barracks, however, all of these good intentions were forgotten and the officers’ influence had dissipated. Each individual soldier wished to be discharged as soon as possible. Concerns for their homes, farms and families outweighed any patriotic

thoughts. Some divisions could scarcely wait to be loaded onto trains.^[1]

All that remained was to muster a volunteer army, which alone could take up the battle against the urban masses of workers. I already considered this idea when I was in Spa, but at the time people could not get used to it and were still hoping that the active army could be used for that purpose. The plan was taken up again in Wilhelmshöhe and, in agreement with Ebert, fleshed out covertly.

Before these volunteer troops entered the scene, we first suffered a serious setback, which demonstrated the unsuitability of the remaining units of the field army.

Which of the feuding socialist groups would rule Berlin was of decisive importance. Together with Ebert, we prepared for the “entry” of ten divisions into Berlin to place his government firmly in the saddle. One of my best colleagues, Major v. Harbou, made the preparations and General Lequis was chosen to command the troops. The Berlin “executive committee,” however, was full of suspicion and demanded that the troops enter without ammunition. The O.H.L. first had to offer Ebert energetic support so that he could oppose this demand. In this connection, Hindenburg turned to Ebert personally for the first time with a letter I had drafted, in which he explained to him once again under which requirements and conditions he and the officer corps were at his disposal, and in which he pointed out the national responsibility that he (Ebert) had taken on. In this letter he writes, “If I address you in the following lines, I do so because it was reported to me that you, too, as a loyal German, love your country above all else, placing it above all personal opinions and wishes, as I have also had to do in order to do justice to the fatherland’s hardships. In keeping with this, I have joined forces with you to rescue our people from the threatened collapse.” The officer corps, he wrote, had placed itself at the government’s disposal, and in turn could and must demand assistance against the outrageous attacks of the local Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils. “It is clear that we cannot emerge from these circumstances unless the government has access to an organ capable of ruthlessly enforcing its decrees and the existing laws. Circumstances being what they are, this organ can only be the army, an army in which the strictest discipline prevails. Discipline, however, stands and falls with the authority of leaders and the absence of politics from the military. ... If the army is to remain a useful instrument of power in the hands of the government, the authority of officers must be reestablished by all means necessary and politics removed from the armed forces. A government decree is necessary for this that clearly states:

1. The military power of command lies solely with the command authorities.
2. The officer’s status as a superior and the accompanying provisions must be restored in full. I would like to stress in particular the absolute necessity of saluting, which is of decisive importance for discipline. It is nonsense to demand discipline and at the same time to abolish the relationship between officers and men when off duty. No army on earth recognizes such provisions.
3. The soldiers’ councils must be removed from the units; only liaisons may remain, who will keep superior officers apprised of the mood among the troops and transmit their wishes and complaints. These confidential liaisons are by no means to participate in the execution of command. ...

The fate of the German people is placed into their hands. It will depend on their decisions whether the German people will achieve renewed prosperity. I am prepared, and with me the entire army, to offer you my unconditional support. ...“

The troops began their entry into Berlin on December 10, but this failed to produce the desired effect of bolstering the government since the muddled state of the Berlin authorities and individuals, including Ebert, could not muster the initiative for decisive action. This had to occur *quickly* because, as time went on, even the selected troops of the field army succumbed to the revolutionary atmosphere in the capital. Celebrating Christmas at home became the catchphrase; there was no holding the men back. Ebert’s

behavior on December 23, when, imprisoned in the Reich Chancellery by the sailor Dorrenbach's People's Navy Division, he forbade the soldiers arriving to free him to shoot, which they found utterly incomprehensible, furthered dampened morale.

On the night of December 23, General Commander Lequis made the final preparations to rout the People's Navy Division from the palace and the Marstall. The events of December 24 are well known: After initial successes, the arrival in the afternoon of large masses of workers, with women and children, from Alexanderplatz breached the cordons around the palace island and caused the dispersal of the remains of the military divisions. The urge to be home for Christmas had proved stronger than military discipline. The entry of the troops ultimately failed to have the desired effect.

I intervened very little personally in the events of these days in Berlin. Only twice did I see myself compelled to remind Ebert vehemently of the conditions of our alliance.

The first occasion was the resolution against the officers formulated on December 18 at the congress of the Workers' and Soldiers Councils, which if implemented would have meant rule by the councils and the complete breakdown of discipline. The Majority Socialists allowed themselves to be intimidated. The O.H.L. responded with a telegram in which Hindenburg threatened on his behalf and mine that we would resign immediately if a government were to be formed based on this resolution. That evening I spoke on the telephone with Ebert and made it clear in the strongest terms that the military leadership stood and fell with this issue. Ebert asked me to come to Berlin; I agreed, also in order to grasp this final opportunity to support the Ebert government. The army high commands, however, received the following telegram:

"I do not recognize the resolution concerning agreements on military organization, especially the position of officers and non-commissioned officers, which the central council of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils drafted in Berlin on Dec. 18, 1918.

I am of the opinion that such a change, which deeply affects the life of the nation, cannot be decided by a one-sided professional representative body, but only by a national assembly convened by the people as a whole.

The army remains loyal to the Ebert government and expects that the latter will continue to recognize as authoritative the commitments it has made concerning the continued existence of the army and the guidelines on the powers of the military confidential consultative councils, thus allowing the officer and non-commissioned officer corps to continue their duties.

I have expressed these concerns to the government. The orders given thus far therefore remain valid."

NOTES

[1] * The railroads were a sorry sight, they had been drained, and relinquishing many locomotives and carriages to the enemy was the final straw forcing the railways onto the lowest level of operation. Even so, the railroad employees did everything humanly possible in those weeks to bring the army home.

Source of original German text: Wilhelm Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen, Jugend, Generalstab, Weltkrieg*, ed. Friedrich Frhr. Hiller von Gaertringen. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957, pp. 472-75.

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