



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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German citizens defend democracy against Kapp Putsch, 1920

March 13,
1920

to: March 17,
1920

Country: Germany

Goals:

To preserve the constitutional, democratic government and to end the coup d'etat

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 110. Slowdown strike
- 116. Generalised strike
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 133. Reluctant and slow compliance
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 145. General administrative noncooperation
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 089. Severance of funds and credit
- 103. Craft strike
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 133. Reluctant and slow compliance
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 145. General administrative noncooperation
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books

- 016. Picketing
- 089. Severance of funds and credit
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 143. Blocking of lines of command and information
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 145. General administrative noncooperation
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Methods in 4th segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 143. Blocking of lines of command and information
- 145. General administrative noncooperation
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Methods in 5th segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 143. Blocking of lines of command and information
- 145. General administrative noncooperation
- 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents
- 148. Mutiny
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 153. Withholding of diplomatic recognition
- 169. Nonviolent air raids
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Methods in 6th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 016. Picketing
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 143. Blocking of lines of command and information
- 145. General administrative noncooperation

- 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 032. Taunting officials
- 052. Silence

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Democracy

Group characterization:

- citizens in all sectors of society (Germans within and outside Berlin)

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

The leaders of the German trade unions

Partners:

Certain military and police units, certain political figures, members of the press

External allies:

Foreign powers (notably, Great Britain); foreign journalists

Involvement of social elites:

The president, Friedrich Ebert, and his cabinet supported the general strike.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- certain military and police units
- certain political figures
- civil servants and government employees
- members of the press

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Cooperative Union of Free Employees' Federations
- Federation of Civil Service Employees
- General German Trade Union Association
- President Ebert

- Social-Democratic Party
- the “Hirsch – Duncker” trade unions

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Workers in the Ruhr Valley

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Mutinying soldiers

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Berlin Security Police

Segment Length: *Just less than one day (approximately 5/6 of a day)*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

The Putsch leadership and their supporting forces (military and political figures)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Leaflets (9) (I), alternative means of communication (180) (II, III), declarations (3) (III, VI).

Campaigner violence:

Clashes took place between groups of the Technical Emergency Corps and the population, as the former were sent to restore basic services (such as water and electricity); confused fighting between armed workers and frightened soldiers continued for some days after the Putsch had ended, in Berlin and elsewhere.

Repressive Violence:

: On Monday 15th, a crowd picketing the Reich Chancellery (where the Putschists had established headquarters) began to hoot and jostle a group of soldiers, who opened fire, killing and wounding several protesters; further clashes occurred in other Berlin neighborhoods and in other cities, such as Frankfurt; street clashes between protesters and Kappist soldiers took place during the Putsch and after it had ended; confused fighting between armed workers and frightened soldiers continued for some days after the Putsch had ended, in Berlin and elsewhere.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The German citizens effectively blocked the putsch attempt.

The organizing groups (mostly trade unions, government officials, and the President and cabinet) survived the putsch.

The campaign grew to encompass most regions of Germany, a huge proportion of the population, and previously neutral or

putsch-allied troops and police forces.

In March 1920, Walther von Lüttwitz, a commanding general in the German army, and Wolfgang Kapp, a German provincial official (with the help of a few other German officials, such as Chief of Staff, General Hans von Seeckt and his collaborators in the Ministry of Defense), attempted a coup d'état (called the Kapp Putsch). The conspirators had two main aims in mind: to avoid the implementation of certain articles in the Treaty of Versailles (such as the reduction of the German army) and to replace the government of the Republic with a Rightist regime.

The Putsch had been prepared for some months, but it was on Friday, March 12th, that the Kappists started their march on Berlin. The president and his Cabinet (the Friedrich Ebert Republican Government) decided to flee Berlin, in order to avoid arrest and to organize opposition to the reactionaries. At six o'clock on Saturday morning, March 13th, the insurgents entered Berlin. As the troops loyal to the Putsch leaders were marching into the capital, hired airplanes performed stunts to maintain a festive and calm atmosphere. Black, white and red flags appeared in many windows, and some Berliners even threw flowers at soldiers who marched through the streets. The population was also doing its best to keep the situation non-violent through manifestations of goodwill. However, it would later become apparent that they were not willing to accept the Putsch. Workers in Berlin took no pains to conceal their dislike of what was going on, and waiters and hotel porters went about their tasks with ominous faces, sometimes even stalling or finding excuses not to do their jobs. Taxi-drivers muttered that the trade unions would have something to say about it all.

The troops had specific instructions to maintain order and control. Machine-guns were set up in key positions within and around the city. At certain street corners and on the walls of institutions designated as key objectives, the Putschists put up posters reading "Whoever proceeds will be shot!" Lüttwitz, Kapp, and their followers started taking over governmental offices in Berlin and ensuring the support of the press. A Foreign Press Censor was established and Kapp announced his intention to issue a proclamation informing Germany of his intentions and of the situation. However, he soon found himself unable to do so. Herr Schnitzler, the "press chief", could not be found, and the press offices seemed unable (rather, unwilling) to get Kapp's manifesto ready for publication (typists and typewriters could not be found, the deadlines for submitting publishable material had been changed). A number of senior officers did not report for duty in the following days and chaos ruled in several garrisons outside Berlin, for which the official explanation was that nobody knew who was entitled to give orders and what was happening in the capital. The conspirators were also having considerable difficulty finding people willing to accept positions in the new Cabinet. In the meantime, Berliners went on with their normal activities without paying any attention to the leaflets (containing Kapp's proclamation and the goals of the conspirators) handed out by soldiers and dropped from airplanes flying over the city. On March 14th, the offices of Freiheit and Vorwärts, two pro-Government newspapers, were occupied by Putschist troops. Within an hour, all the printers in Berlin had walked out on strike.

Later that day, the President of the German Republic, Friedrich Ebert, sent an appeal to the population seeking help in combating the nationalist uprising. The call urged the nation to oppose the Kappists and a general strike was suggested by both the Ebert Cabinet and the Executive of the Social-Democrat Party. The closing paragraph of the President's call therefore urged Germans loyal to the Republic to: "Strike! Lay down your work and strangle this military dictatorship! Fight with every weapon to preserve the Republic! Lay aside every division. There is but one means to achieve this goal: the paralysis of all economic life. Not a hand must stir, not a worker give aid to the military dictatorship. General strike all along the line! Proletarians, unite!"

The leadership of the strike was assumed by the Free Trade Unions. The General German Trade Union Association (Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund or ADGB) and the Cooperative Union of Free Employees' Federations (Arbeitsgemeinschaft freier Angestelltenverbände) were able to organize the deeply divided workers' movement in common action. Every trade and group was called upon to do its duty to combat the reactionary coup, the sole exemptions being the waterworks, hospitals, and administration of the workers' sickness-funds. The Federation of Civil Service Employees took a similar stand, as did the "Hirsch – Duncker" trade unions. On Sunday, March 14th, workers all over Germany launched a general strike. Even before the official calls for the general strike had reached the workers of Berlin, thousands of them had already

spontaneously ceased work. Many factories were closed even by Saturday noon.

It was becoming evident that the new regime faced strong opposition among the German population. The response of army units outside Berlin had been mixed, some supporting the coup, some remaining loyal to the Ebert government, and others waiting to see how things would turn out. Many regions of Germany refused to acknowledge the authority of the Kapp Government, and in places fighting broke out between army units and anti-militarist leftists. Within a short time, and in spite of the absence of newspapers, word of the general strike call spread, and the work stoppage in Berlin became almost universal. There were no trams, and by noon the bus and subway services ceased. In the evening, the city was dark, and all hotels and restaurants were closed. Gas, electricity and even water supplies were lacking; newspapers did not appear, and only the telephone service remained. Even the telegraph clerks at the Berlin Post Office refused to heed the Kappists' authority, and by the third day of the coup, the Kappists had taken matters into their own hands, transmitting only messages they approved of and refusing to allow news of the working-class opposition to the new Government to be dispatched abroad.

Successive attempts over the next few days to persuade the state bank to disgorge the funds urgently required by the Kapp regime met with ill success since approved officials refused to sign release forms and the banks refused to release the funds. Exasperated by this refusal, the government ordered representatives to go to the bank and obtain money by force if necessary, but these representatives refused to become "official bank robbers". Against this background of general disintegration, the Kappists' slender authority was ebbing away. In the press office, official actions were challenged by subordinates. In the telegraph office, the clerks had taken power into their own hands. Many of the foreign correspondents stopped submitting their dispatches to the Kapp Government for censorship and resorted to a variety of expedients for evading his control. Since no Berlin papers were allowed to appear, several editors took the unorthodox step of having news placarded in the windows of the fifty or so press agencies.

The attempt to run industry and cow the populace merely by an overwhelming display of brute force was already palpably failing in its aim. Members of the Kapp Government recognized that the Putsch was as yet upheld only by the military and advocated negotiation with the workers' committees. Other members called for ruthless action against the strikers. A decree was issued on Monday, the 15th, stating that "the ringleaders who are guilty of acts specified in the decree for safe-guarding important economic services, and in the decree for the protection of labor peace, as well as the strike pickets, will be punished with death." Meanwhile, despite the threats of dire punishment, the strike spread until practically all rail traffic in the country was paralyzed and communications interrupted or severely affected everywhere. The railroad stations were surrounded by barbed wire entanglements. Clashes took place between groups of the Technical Emergency Corps and the population, as the former were sent to restore basic services (such as water and electricity).

Since most of the ministerial bureaucracy refused to cooperate with the Kapp Government, and since the protesting workers and employees had brought the whole economy to a standstill, the failure of the coup was already foreseeable. The Putschist troops erected barbed-wire entanglements in the main streets and prepared to repel the popular opposition. On Monday 15th, a crowd picketing the Reich Chancellery (where the Putschists had established headquarters) began to hoot and jostle a group of soldiers, who opened fire, killing and wounding several protesters. Further clashes occurred in other Berlin neighborhoods and in other cities, such as Frankfurt. In the meantime, the strike was proving its effect in several parts of the country. The industrial Ruhr region, for instance, had been completely paralyzed, a fact that worried the Putsch leaders in Berlin and made them question their ability to maintain control. Some of them suggested simple and brutal measures: shooting the trade union leaders and striking pickets, and forcing striking workers to go back to their jobs by the threat of a similar fate. Kapp and Lüttwitz were however unwilling to unleash the military on German citizens, especially on the people of Berlin. The Putschists could not count on the troops anyway, since the vast majority of them had lost hope in the Putsch leadership in Berlin.

On Tuesday, March 16th, a Government plane appeared over the capital to drop a leaflet entitled "The Collapse of the Military Dictatorship". The same afternoon, British officials notified Berlin that Great Britain would not recognize the Kapp Government. That night, a battalion in Berlin mutinied, placed its officers under arrest and declared its allegiance to the constitutional Government. The morning of March 17th brought no relief for the Putschists. The Berlin Security Police had reversed its stand and now demanded Kapp's resignation. Clashes in the streets were becoming increasingly frequent (there had

already been more than a hundred casualties) and there was a report of another mutiny in Berlin.

All this convinced Kapp that it was time to go. In the early afternoon of Wednesday, March 17th 1920, he drafted a second proclamation announcing his resignation. General Luttwitz briefly toyed with the idea of establishing himself as a military dictator, but soon abandoned the notion. The Putsch officially ended at six o'clock on Wednesday evening – less than five days after it had begun. Confused fighting continued for some days between armed workers and frightened soldiers in Berlin and elsewhere, but the authority of the Ebert regime was soon restored throughout the country.

Research Notes

Influences:

This campaign influenced the German defense of the Ruhr Valley against French occupation (see "Germans defend Ruhr Valley from French invasion (Ruhrkampf), 1923-1924")(2).

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See also: Sharp, Gene. *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential*. Boston: Extending Horizons Books, 2005.

Additional Notes:

The choice to strike: The danger of a general strike was that it could easily get out of control and turn into civil war. On the other hand, however, a general strike had a good chance of success in spring 1920. An inflation-induced economic boom had brought Germany to near-full employment. Striking workers did not have to worry that their jobs would be taken by the

unemployed. A general strike against a military coup and for the constitutional authority of the state possessed an undeniable democratic legitimacy. And there was every reason to believe that a strong signal from workers and employees was necessary in order to convince the bureaucracy to unite against the Putsch and to force its leaders to capitulate.

Surpassing political cleavages: The surprising unity of the nation's workers against the Kapp Putsch transcended political lines, with both the center non-Socialist parties and the Democrats supporting the strike call. The Catholic trade unions of the Rhine-land and the so-called "yellow" unions of the Democrats were for once united in common purpose with the two Socialist parties and the Communists.

The Putsch leaders' quest for solutions: Doubting the wisdom of his coup and looking anxiously for a simple way to escape his dilemma, Kapp sought a "compromise" with the Ebert Government, the most important demand of which was that both sides condemn the general strike and emphasize the need for a resumption of production. Fortunately for the German workers, Ebert was absolutely adamant in refusing even to consider such a "compromise".

The Putsch leaders sought both internal and international solutions to the crisis. The Kappists distributed handbills declaring that the flour reserved for the Jewish Passover had been confiscated and would be distributed to the workers – endeavoring to start an anti-Jewish pogrom as a means of distracting attention from themselves. When this and other means to institute control over the population failed, the Putsch leaders looked for international support, appealing to Great Britain to pressure the Ebert Government.

The general strike itself did not end on March 17, since many groups continued to strike after this point hoping to gain further concessions from the restored government or ensuring the reorganization of the government to eliminate all Putschists. The government was completely reorganized by March 27, but not all the economic demands of this continued strike (separate from the campaign against the putsch) were resolved.

Edited by Max Rennebohm (18/05/2011)

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

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