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Freikorps

By [Mattheis Bucholtz](#)

***Freikorps* units were paramilitary formations which generally supported rightwing political causes, although they existed within a broader paramilitary environment. Many First World War veterans joined the *Freikorps* when they were first created in late November 1918.**

***Freikorps* units were involved in combat operations during political unrest in the early years of the Weimar Republic before undergoing a significant organizational and methodological transformation into political organizations in the late 1920s.**

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Early Years

By the end of November 1918, there were only seven *Freikorps* units, however the pace and scope of *Freikorps* recruitment dramatically increased during political unrest in December of that year. By 1 January 1919, there were 103 *Freikorps* units. Exact figures are missing, but records indicate that as many as 1.5 million men participated in *Freikorps* formations and their associated organizations between November 1918 and December 1923. As many as 500,000 troops directly served in units designated as “*Freikorps*,” although these numbers are only estimates.

Freikorps units were created primarily in three ways. First, many of the largest *Freikorps* units were formed through the conversion of former imperial army formations. These units contained many First

World War veterans, and were generally loyal to the [army high command](#). Second, some former imperial army officers independently organized *Freikorps* units from former wartime comrades. Many of these units proved to be rebellious and difficult for the [German government](#) and military to control. Third, *Freikorps* units were periodically created as a response to local crises, such as agitation along on the [Polish border](#) or leftwing domestic rebellions. These units were often short-lived and usually dissolved after only a few weeks or months of activity, having no unifying ideology or political cause that stretched beyond an immediate, localized crisis. Leaving behind few historical records, the “crisis *Freikorps*” represented the least professional and military capable expression of the *Freikorps* movement.

Operation

Under the direction of Social Democrat [Gustav Noske \(1868-1946\)](#), the *Freikorps*’ first major deployment came during the so-called “Spartacus Revolt” in January 1919 in Berlin. The quick and harsh suppression of the leftwing uprising and the subsequent campaign against the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council movement in northern and central Germany earned the *Freikorps* a reputation for violence and frequent use of overwhelming firepower against their enemies. However, recent scholarship by Benjamin Ziemann has challenged this narrative, which was largely self-promoted by the *Freikorps*. While the largest and most professional of the *Freikorps* formations did occasionally deploy for engagements in a standardized military fashion in major operations, such as in Berlin (January 1919), Bremen (January 1919), Weimar (February 1919), Munich (April-May 1919), Latvia (February – May 1919), Estonia (May – July 1919), Munich (March – April 1920), the Ruhr (April 1920), Hamburg (1921) and The Battle of the Annaberg (May 1921), these were infrequent and represented the most battle-like moments of the *Freikorps* movement. Although these combat actions became central to the popular image of the *Freikorps*, they were rare compared to policing and occupation operations performed by smaller and more *ad hoc* units that were more akin to asymmetrical combat formations.

Broadly speaking, *Freikorps* deployments can be grouped into two main categories: reactive and pro-active. The most battle-like combat formations, those deploying significant military hardware such as armoured cars, [artillery](#), mortars, and [machine guns](#), were used to respond to leftwing revolts or clashes with [Polish paramilitaries](#). Domestically, their primary objective was to crush all trade union and communist activity that openly disobeyed Social Democrat leader [Friedrich Ebert’s \(1871-1925\)](#) government. However, after the *Freikorps* units quickly, and often bloodlessly, pacified their opponents, they turned to a network of support units to maintain so-called “Peace and Order” (“*Ruhe und Ordnung*”). Support units, such as the Civil Guards (*Einwohnerwehr*), the Security Police (*Sicherheitspolizei*), the Border Guards (*Grenzschutz*), and the People’s Militia (*Volkswehr*) played a critical role in maintaining the appearance of authority in conquered regions and in rural areas. *Freikorps* formations were also active outside of Germany’s borders, particularly in the [Baltic states](#) of Latvia and Estonia from March to July 1919. Fiercely independent, and increasingly radical in their nationalist sentiment, the actions of the renegade Baltic *Freikorps* significantly influenced the

government's perception of the [paramilitary](#) movement thereafter.

Transformation

The major transformation of the *Freikorps* movement from a socially and politically significant military phenomenon into a collection of dissident political organizations occurred in the spring of 1920. Following their involvement in the failed *Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch* in March of that year, and the appointment of General [Hans von Seeckt \(1866-1936\)](#) as commander of the *Reichswehr*, the *Freikorps*' autonomy and strength began to decline. Seeckt saw the *Freikorps* as a symbol of rebellion and independence within the military realm. He used his powerful influence over the officer corps to cull the vast majority of *Freikorps* troops from the *Reichswehr* and restrict future access to all government funds and equipment to the *Freikorps* movement.

The end of government approval and assistance had a powerful effect on the nature of the *Freikorps* and prompted their transition from a functional military organization into an illegal, violent social and political movement, devoid of any military value. With the loss of crucial government support, *Freikorps* members began to drift away from their units until only a very small, but highly politically motivated core remained by 1921.

By 1923, the structural organization of *Freikorps* units had changed drastically from their immediate postwar form. By in large the major military capabilities of the *Freikorps* no longer existed, and instead they tended to operate as "political combat leagues" as historian James Diehl has described them, focused on propaganda activities and occasional political assassinations. Although still committed to the use of violence to achieve political objectives, after 1923 the *Freikorps* were more active in street fighting and pub brawls than attacking dissident communists.

Legacy

The legacy of the *Freikorps* movement must be assessed both in terms of the role its former members would play in rightwing politics in the later Weimar era and the Third Reich, as well as its importance as a cultural and political symbol after 1923.

From an organizational perspective, the *Freikorps* movement was shattered after Hans von Seeckt's reformation of the *Reichswehr*. After 1923, *Freikorps* operation drastically changed and they were generally re-organized as "political combat leagues," with almost no military value. Lacking firepower and legal protection, *Freikorps* units now focused on street brawls and dispersing socialist and communist meetings. Many members left the *Freikorps* movement either as private citizens, or joined the other organizations, like the *Stahlhelm* veterans association, or the National Socialists SA (*Sturmabteilung* or Storm Troopers). While some former *Freikorps* members eventually reached prominence during the Third Reich, they tend to be over shadowed by the general distrust most *Freikorps* members faced within the National Socialist German Worker's Party (NSDAP). Indeed many *Freikorps* fighters were purged during [Adolf Hitler's \(1889-1945\)](#) June 1934 purge ("*Röhm-*

Putsch”).

However, even as the military strength of the movement faded after 1920, Freikorps memoirs ensured that the image of the *Freikorps* Fighter (*Freikorpskämpfer*) remained a powerful political symbol among rightwing circles in the late Weimar Republic. Even during the Nazi period, the symbol of the *Freikorpskämpfer* retained some of its political value. The *Freikorps* fighter became a plastic symbol of [nationalism](#), anti-communism, and militarized [masculinity](#) deployed by NSDAP to co-opt the lingering social and political support of the once powerful movement.

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