

BOOK REVIEW

## Deutsche Freikorps. Sozialgeschichte und Kontinuitäten (para)militärischer Gewalt zwischen Weltkrieg, Revolution und Nationalsozialismus

By Jan-Philipp Pomplun. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023. Pp. 354. Hardcover €65.00. ISBN: 978-3525311462.

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The paramilitary Freikorps units that engaged in brutal violence against the perceived internal and external enemies of Germany in the aftermath of the First World War have been the subject of an extensive literature. As Jan-Philipp Pomplun notes at the outset of this excellent monograph, much of the existing literature has been colored by the memoirs, novels, and stories written by participants and contemporary observers whose sensationalized and idealized depictions were often carried over uncritically into scholarly accounts. Pomplun's extensive research provides an important corrective to previous understandings of who the Freikorps fighters were and what factors underpinned their violent excesses.

The book begins with an insightful introduction in which Pomplun engages with existing works on the Freikorps phenomenon, while also providing an extensive overview of the source base and methodological approach at the heart of his study. Since much of the archival material related to north German Freikorps units was destroyed in the Second World War, Pomplun focuses primarily on south German sources—particularly the surviving personnel rosters (*Stammrollen*) from eleven Freikorps units in Bavaria, Baden, and Württemberg. Of the nearly 20,000 men who fought in these units, Pomplun selected a representative sample of nearly 3,200 members, which provides the basis for his analysis of these units' social, demographic, and confessional makeup.

The remainder of the book is divided into four overarching chapters, beginning with a broad overview in the first chapter of the activities of the Freikorps units from their formation at the end of the First World War to their progressive dissolution in the early 1920s. The second chapter provides a careful analysis of the social backgrounds of Freikorps members, examining their professional and class origins as well as their regional, confessional, generational, and familial identities. The third chapter focuses specifically on the phenomenon of Freikorps violence, exploring the influence of World War I frontline experience and the subsequent role played by Freikorps training, before highlighting particular points of engagement, such as the fighting in Berlin, Munich, and the Baltic region in 1919, the suppression of the uprising in the Ruhr in 1920, and the conflict along the German-Polish border between 1919 and 1921. The fourth chapter addresses the important question of continuities between Freikorps fighters and National Socialism.

Within that structural framework, Pomplun's research provides a number of new insights into the Freikorps phenomenon. Whereas previous accounts often accentuated the role played by officers and university students in shaping Freikorps identity—arrayed typically against the interests of workers—Pomplun's analysis demonstrates that men from working-class backgrounds were statistically over-represented to a significant degree among

Freikorps members. In confessional terms, Pomplun finds, perhaps not surprisingly, that the Freikorps cause resonated significantly within Protestant and Catholic circles disaffected by the fall of the monarchy (with Protestants being generally less open to engagement with the new republic). His statistical analysis found a non-negligible level of participation from theology students and clergy. What is perhaps more noteworthy, however, is the fact that Jews were also represented among the Freikorps units in roughly the same numbers as their proportion of the population.

In explaining the sources of Freikorps violence, earlier works emphasized the legacy of frontline war brutalization. Pomplun's work calls that emphasis into question, noting that less than half of Freikorps fighters had demonstrable wartime fighting experience. Pomplun focuses instead on the relative absence of institutional and structural restraints on Freikorps brutality, implicating the civilian politicians who not only tolerated but relied on the deployment of Freikorps violence. As Pomplun notes, Social Democratic Reichswehrminister Gustav Noske issued an infamous order in the midst of the intense fighting in Berlin in March 1919 to "immediately shoot any person found with a weapon" (178). Although that order was rescinded a few days later, it set an important precedent for the use of virtually unrestrained violence.

Finally, Pomplun deals extensively with the issue, emphasized or at least implied in almost all accounts of the Freikorps phenomenon, of continuities with National Socialism. Pomplun demonstrates that while important individual continuities can be documented at the leadership level, such connections do not generally apply to the rank and file of Freikorps members. In broad terms, the number of ex-Freikorps fighters who eventually joined the Nazi Party was roughly proportionate to the overall German male population, not greater. Pomplun's analysis of the Nazi SA (238–253) and SS (254–276) reveals an even lower proportional level of ex-Freikorps membership. The image of a fundamental connection between the Freikorps and the Nazis, while perhaps applicable in terms of idealized imagery and a mythologized fighting spirit, was rather limited in terms of personnel and membership.

Pomplun's research is thorough, his findings significant, and his presentation of often complex developments laudably clear. This is an important book that deserves a wide readership.