

Sprenger, Matthias: *Landsknechte auf dem Weg ins Dritte Reich? Zu Genese und Wandel des Freikorpsmythos*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag 2008. ISBN: 978-3-506-76518-5; 240 S.

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Matthias Sprenger's published doctoral dissertation is a focused analysis of the myths and constructed memories that define the image of the Freikorps. To this day, the image of the Freikorps as anti-republican mercenaries, harbingers of National Socialism, and the „first soldiers of the Third Reich“<sup>1</sup>, have largely gone unchallenged. Few scholars have investigated the degree to which our understanding of these volunteer armies is based on myths honed during the Nazi period. In this pioneering study of the Freikorps legend and its impact on modern scholarship, Sprenger deconstructs the myths shaped during the Weimar Republic and Third Reich. He carefully dissects the misconceived notion of the Freikorps as an organized, monolithic entity by exploring the range of myths surrounding its brief lifespan, and how these myths evolved in tandem with the dramatic shifts in German politics. His book reveals how public memory of the Freikorps and the contemporary body of scholarship rest on constructed realities promulgated under National Socialism.

‘Landsknechte auf dem Weg ins Dritte Reich?’ is comprised of ten chapters, six of which investigate the various Freikorps myths in detail. Sprenger's intent is not to produce a new military history of the Freikorps, rather, his stated objectives are to identify and isolate the self-styled lore idealized in novels and memoir literature, and how these legends were manipulated by the Nazis for political purposes. The first three chapters provide background on the major Freikorps campaigns from 1918 to 1923, the genesis of the Freikorps legend, and his selection of sources. Sprenger's book relies overwhelmingly on Freikorps memoirs and novels published in the 1920s and 30s, sources

previously mined by scholars such as Robert Waite, Hagen Schulze, Klaus Theweleit, and Hannsjoachim Koch. Sprenger's approach differs in that he reevaluates these works from the perspective of a cultural and historical analysis. While the great majority of the publications from the 1920s are sensational and self-serving, their usefulness derives from seeing how the Freikorpsmen perceived themselves. Through a close reading of the literature from 1919 into the Nazi period, Sprenger shows that the Freikorps' identity was in a continual state of flux. The paucity of surviving archival sources retained by the Bundesarchiv means that historical research on the Freikorps depends heavily on contemporary literature. Sprenger argues that many historians treated these accounts uncritically, often at face value, which ensured that carefully honed stereotypes of right-wing freebooters and political soldiers long outlived the Third Reich.

The centerpiece of the book investigates the six individual myths that left an indelible mark on the Freikorps' legacy: the Dolchstoß of November 1918, the juxtaposing images of mercenaries and political soldiers, ideation of brutality and action, glorification of war, and its affiliation with the swastika. First, Sprenger argues that the Freikorps movement was a decentralized, heterogeneous organization. He convincingly shows that it represented an amalgamation of diverse military units, many of which harbored competing political ideologies, and whose allegiance was primarily bound to the individual regiment and commanding officer. Contrary to popular misperceptions, there was no encompassing esprit de corps or overarching group comradeship, in fact, Sprenger suggests it is inaccurate to universally refer to „the“ Freikorps. He draws attention to the three specific author groups responsible for crafting the iconic image of the Freikorps through their literature: Prussian conservatives, the representatives of the Soldatischer Nationalismus (soldier-nationalists), such as Ernst Jünger, and the National Socialist sympathizers. During the Weimar years, the soldier-nationalists, which included notably figures such as Ernst von Salomon, defined the popular Freikorps image. Its members were mostly apolitical,

<sup>1</sup> Robert G. L. Waite, *The Free Corps Movement in Post-war Germany*, Cambridge 1952, p. viii.

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anti-bourgeois, anti-establishment; their primary motive for joining the Freikorps was to fight. Its writers glorify the war and the use of violence, and style themselves after the Landsknechte of the Early Modern era. Rather than wage war solely for pay, however, these modern, self-proclaimed mercenaries viewed war as the highest masculine virtue and, therefore, as an end in itself. After 1933/4, the National Socialist sympathizers claimed the Freikorps mantle. According to Sprenger, their goal was to establish continuity from the birth of the volunteer armies in November 1918 to the rise of Nazism. In their depictions, the Third Reich became the logical conclusion to the Freikorps movement. After Hitler's seizure of power, the mercenary image proved irreconcilable with the National Socialist ideal of the political fighter, and here Sprenger shows how the Nazis successfully integrated the myths of martial combatant and nascent party loyalist to create the myth of the Freikorps political soldier. The „Gleichschaltung“ of the Freikorps literature, in tandem with the rise of several of its veterans to prominence in the NSDAP, SA, and SS, led to the established image of the proto-Nazi Freikorpsmen who, in the words of Manfred Killinger, „had been National Socialists all along without having realized it.“ (p. 59)

The thrust of Sprenger's narrative tackles the multitude of Freikorps myths and stereotypes that survived the Nazi era intact and persist in modern scholarship to this day. The link between German defeat in World War I and the spontaneous rise of volunteer paramilitary regiments, manned by embittered front soldiers and university students, to safeguard the German nation from internal collapse was a mere literary construct that existed only in retrospect. In reality, as the author proves, many Freikorps commanders complained of poor quality personnel, lamented the „Gesindel“ admitted into their ranks, and were constantly frustrated by high desertion rates (p. 76). Contrary to later claims that German soldiers returned to a cold, indifferent home front in 1918, most Freikorps authors recalled the heroes welcome they received upon demobilization. Many even received assistance from former officers in finding employment as economic

crisis set in. These facts were quietly censored during the Nazi era, as many memoirs were edited and republished in order to correct such embarrassing inconsistencies. It would be irresponsible to minimize the progressive radicalization of many ex-Freikorps members during the later Weimar years, but their reasons are similar to other Germans who struggled under the specter of financial ruin and societal upheaval in the late 1920s and early 30s. But Sprenger presents a solid case that the Nazified image of the rightist, anti-democratic, political soldier was a characterization from the Third Reich that largely endured unscathed.

Sprenger's work is indispensable, and fills a significant void in the existing scholarship. The author's assessment focuses solely on deconstructing the myths surrounding the Freikorps, he therefore avoids grand, renewed interpretations of its rightful historical legacy. Rather, his conclusions beg for further research, particularly concerning the roles of leftist and socialist Freikorps units, the participation of German Jewish volunteers, and inter-group relations amongst the host of regiments. As such, his book invites a reappraisal on the relevance of the Freikorps in the rise of the NSDAP, as well as its impact on German military culture and operations during the Second World War.

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