

MASCULINITY AND AMBITION IN THE BALTIC ADVENTURE

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The Baltic has always stood on the periphery of Europe, a land shrouded in mystery to the Western European eye. The region had fairly diverse religious practice, with variations in pagan practice existing well into the 13th century among the native Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians. Western crusaders looked onto the Baltic with opportunity; the lack of a centralized authority among the tribes led to a power vacuum¹. Western crusaders then looked to this area not only as an un-christianized place ripe for crusade but also as a place to expand their own personal influence while settling Germanic peoples. This call of German people to the Baltic would continue as a motif well into the 20th century, called the *Baltikum*. The German presence in the Baltic was not forgotten, and was a common topic for 19th century romanticism. In *Vanguard of Nazism*, Robert G. L. Waite writes “Generations of German Romanticists have fallen under the spell of the *Baltikum*, and have chanted the praises of this weird land”². He writes in the context of interwar Germany in the 20th century, where many were agitating for German involvement in the region. While Germany’s military was largely de-clawed by the Treaty of Versailles, the volunteer organized Freikorps, or Free Companies, were able to become involved in the region. In this way, their ill-fated “Baltic Adventure” came to represent the dangerous mixture of romanticized irredentist justification for fighting with the bruised masculinity of the losing soldiers of the First World War.

It was this defeat in the First World War that would begin the chain of events that led to the ill-fated Baltic Adventure. The Treaty of Versailles put heavy restrictions on the military of Germany, which had now become the fledgling Weimar Republic. The result was an armed forces that retained its traditional imperial leadership with only a nominal allegiance to the republic, allied only in opposition to threat of Bolshevik revolution³. The Weimar government appointed Gustav Noske as Minister of National Defense and gave him substantial powers to quell the rebellious factions in Berlin and abroad. He realized the weakness of the government’s situation, and realized the existing army was not reliable enough or necessarily to be trusted. He needed an army, and the large amount of dismissed soldiers (many of whom kept their rifles) had organized themselves into free companies to serve various factions. Noske approved of a force for the Republic on January 4, 1919⁴. These men were apparently very organized and well drilled, likely because most were former army rankers (not all Freikorps are to be this well drilled however)⁵. The era of the Freikorps had begun, and the Weimar government had now sanctioned a paramilitary movement that would come to cause grief in Germany and most notably in the Baltic.

Looking now to the Baltic, we see a rising revanchist sentiment among German army commanders and Freikorps members towards the Baltic. The idea of irredentist claims are a

common feature of modern history; states looking back in history, sometimes even to ancient periods. After their defeat in World War I and the resulting loss of their colonies, many looked to the Baltic: an area long since colonized and inhabited by Germans. This Baltikum, the romantic and medieval view of the region, can be seen in a recruiting poster for a Freikorps regiment featuring a German man wielding a sword and shield⁶. Further when Freikorps entered the region many took this to heart, the battle cry of medieval crusading Germans coming into use again: “*Gen Ostland wollen wir reiten!*”. The Baltic was currently in a state of fractious instability, with newly formed nationalistic republics in conflict with the long established German minority, the Baltic Barons. These barons were the legacy of the medieval Teutonic conquest, and were influential even after Russia had cemented its power in the region. The Baltic Germans remained a “dominant force” in Baltic society, a “Baltic German superstructure” remaining in place even after Peter the Great and his successors occupied the region⁷.

In the newly formed Baltic republics there was an overall desire to remove themselves from the control of the Baltic German Barons, while these barons equally wanted to reassert their perceived rightful leadership of the region. All three of Baltic states feared a return to Baltic German control, while also worrying about Soviet ambitions. In fact, Lithuania was equally worried about Poland, who in 1920 seized their town of Vilnius⁸. In this way achieving Baltic unity was difficult, with Estonia and Latvia forming alliances while Lithuania was doubtful. The great powers of Germany, the Soviet Union, and even Poland all struggled to bring the Baltic under their respective spheres of influence. Lithuania was getting the worst of this, as Germany also claimed their city of Memel. Britain and France were deeply interested in this region as well, as they were concerned primarily with controlling the spread of Bolshevism. The Latvian government (led by Prime Minister Karlis Ulmanis) was also relatively unpopular and fearful for its position, so after seeking approval from Britain they signed a treaty allowing German Freikorps to enter Latvia. They were to assist the Latvian government in fighting the Bolsheviks, and in return for at least 4 weeks of service they would get Latvian citizenship⁹. It is an important distinction to make that they they would receive citizenship and not land grants.

The opportunity to fight Bolshevism and to relive the Baltikum was not enough to get Germans to abandon their life in Germany, and so material rewards were often offered in the form of land. Promised great estates, these soldiers were to be sourly disappointed; Gustav Noske wrote “What was not promised in posters, the recruitment officers promised verbally.”¹⁰. This desire to obtain land and personal gain is also seen in Freikorps leader Gerhard Roßbach, who was described by contemporary biographer Arnolt Bronnen as such “His attitude was neither anti-Bolshevist nor pro-Bolshevist: it was simply German. An anti-Bolshevist cloak had been thrown over the shoulders of the enterprise to shield it from the probing eyes of the Entente... they fought for nothing else than for German land, for German conquest and for German colonization of the Baltic Sea.”¹¹. Though no land was promised in the Latvian-German treaty, there was some real opportunity for gaining land. German landowners pledged to sell one third of their land at pre-war, and thus pre-inflation prices¹². Thus one cannot separate the conflict between the Barons, the native governments, and the Freikorps members with their desire for land. This explains the hesitation of the Baltic governments to let Freikorps into their country. However when World War I ended, the order was given in the Treaty of Versailles for German forces to remain in the Baltic to fight Bolshevism. However, the embittered soldiers came back to Germany and only two days after fighting ceased in the west the Red Army began a “major offensive” in the Baltics, seizing Riga on January 3, 1919¹³. Estonia was thus too far

exposed and did not border relevant states to request help directly, while Lithuania was hesitant of German and Polish ambitions on their territory. Thus, it was Latvia who had to make the fateful decision to let German forces enter their country.

The granting of land in return for military service is ancient one, bringing to mind the Roman legionaries who received land in return for service and to medieval knights that often received fiefs in return for loyal service. Much more relevant to the Baltic however is the rewarding of land during the Baltic Crusade, where Teutonic and Livonian crusaders, often called Sword-Brothers, were given substantial estates and positions of authority over local populations¹⁴. These people were often recently Christianized, often by force, so it is doubtless tensions remained high amongst these foreign landed elite and the local Balts. A clear parallel can be seen in the period of the Freikorps, where the Baltic Barons wanted to reassert this right to minority rule. The offer to sell land cheaply to incoming Germans was almost an invitation into this elite, an implicit contract of support that reminds one of the feudal ties of the Teutonic period. The fondness of Freikorps for these Baltic Germans can be seen in the writing of Freikorps leader Major Fletcher who writes “In the common life and common battle shared with the Balts... I only found loyalty and honor among the [German] Balts!”¹⁵. The degree to which this region was divided not only among regional ethnic groups but also among these Germanic “colonizers” can be seen to parallel colonial and imperial societies around the world, even as the Baltic technically stood on the periphery of Europe.

As the Freikorps moved into the Baltic, their well equipped and generally experienced troops easily obtained a foothold in Latvia. It was not long after securing its position that they quickly became involved in Baltic politics. They still had not secured the vital port of Riga, but the political situation in Latvia demanded their attention. The army organized by the Latvian government, the Landeswehr, was supposed to be a combined Latvian-German force. Previously mentioned Freikorps commander Major Fletcher was given command of this army, and he quickly began dismissing all Latvian officers and replacing them with Germans¹⁶. This pleased the Baltic Barons, who understand as well as anyone that who controls the army controls the state. The Ulmanis government continued to work against the Baltic Barons, and after a request for more representation and “more equitable treatment” was denied it was decided by the Germanic Balt and Freikorps alliance the most severe of political strategies was in order. After a Freikorps Lieutenant was arrested for conspiring against the Ulmanis government (he most likely was), men of the von Pfeffer Free Corps freed their comrade and took the entire Latvian army staff prisoner: over 550 officers¹⁷. Ulmanis escaped to the British, and the executive was given to pro-German pastor Andreas Needra, who Waite describes earnestly as a “little quisling”¹⁸. With their first coup in their resume, the Freikorps and the now German dominated Landeswehr moved to take Riga.

Riga was not only of strategic importance to the Freikorps; it held sentimental value as the first center established by the crusading knights centuries ago¹⁹. At this point, people were starting to get nervous at the success of the Freikorps, and the Weimar government refused to authorize an attack on Riga. The obedience of the Freikorps was not well known. They attacked with the Landwehr leading, and won a triumphant victory. This was to be the high point of the Baltic campaign, for it would be downhill from here for the Freikorps²⁰. Once Riga was secure, the Freikorps unleashed terror on a scale possibly greater than the so-called “red terror” they had defeated. Thousands of Rigans were killed and executed, and strict martial law was enforced with such terms as execution for anyone on the streets past 6 PM or using a private telephone²¹.

This brutality was not uncommon for the Freikorps, similar extrajudicial killings occurred when they suppressed the socialist uprisings in the Ruhr Valley. An example of this brutality can be seen in the candid writings of Maximilian Scheer: “Anyone who falls into our hands first gets the rifle butt and then is finished off with a bullet... we even shot 10 Red Cross nurses on sight because they were carrying pistols. We shot those little ladies with pleasure... they cried and pleaded with us to save their lives.”²². While killings were not uncommon on both sides of the Ruhr conflict, the Freikorps were the first to “make those methods of domestic strife popular”²³. The brutal nature of the Freikorps relates directly to their dangerous tendency of hyper-masculinity.

The overly masculine nature of the Freikorps is found throughout primary writings like those of Freikorps member Ernst von Salomon: “This then was the one problem of the Free Corps fighter: to give his utmost so that the real meaning of the War could be made manifest to the very limit of his power”²⁴. This emphasis on personal power is heavily covered in Klaus Theweleit’s two part psychological examination of several Freikorps members, who would later become National Socialists. The importance of personal power and agency in the Freikorps soldier is key according to Theweleit²⁵. While most all Freikorps serving in the Baltic held this almost selfish desire for power, which Theweleit calls the “White Terror”, the degree to which this is manifests itself towards authority varied. For example, the infamous Iron Division followed the organizational scheme of the wartime field armies including machine gun, flamethrower, and balloon sections. However many regiments contained a fierce “freebooter spirit”, a motif commonly associated with the aforementioned desire for power and agency. The Hamburg Free Corps exemplified this independent spirit. These men were seen by the army command as one of the “better formations”, and yet one of their members describes them as such “They let their hair and beards grow long and they saluted only the officers they knew and liked... this crazy outfit recognized none of the usual military regulations.”. Further they used “streetlights and windows for target practice” and the only authority they followed was their own Fuhrer, or commander²⁶.

Even though this “Freebooter Spirit” often included a disregard for formal command structure, commanders like Joseph Bischoff of the Iron Division approved of and adopted the freebooter label: “This is my twelfth year of war-making... I’m an old Free-booter”²⁷. It was this sympathy for the nature of the Freikorps among many of its leaders that likely lead to much of its violent behavior, as it takes a respected and stern commander to stop his men from looting or acting disorderly; this can be seen as the Baltic Adventure progresses. As the British wised up to the true territorial ambitions of the Freikorps, they began to supply the native Latvians with weapons, and provided them close naval support²⁸. This allied support would begin the retreat of the Freikorps from the Baltic, but this retreat would come at a heavy cost to the people of Latvia. The Freikorps plundered, looted, and razed their way through Latvia in their retreat²⁹. The manner in which the destruction was done, with a kind of sick pleasure, extols of the dangers of this “freebooter spirit” and its masculine undertones; see in the writings of von Salomon “We no longer had anything of human decency left in our hearts. The land where we had lived groaned with destruction. Where once peaceful villages stood, was now only soot, ashes and burning embers after we had passed... there burned our hopes,... the laws and values of the civilized world;... and so we came back swaggering, drunken, laden with plunder.”³⁰. Waite brings up the fitting german term used, Vernichtungsfreude, the joy in destruction and chaos³¹.

The failure of the Baltic Adventure may not seem to be of much consequence; history tends to emphasize the importance and impact of great victories, not defeats. However many of the Freikorps members who fought in the Baltic would come to support Hitler's regime, and this failure would come to be a formative experience. The fighting was polarizing, and the violent masculinity they expressed made returning to domestic republican life in Germany difficult. Further these dangerous paramilitary organizations could not be just left to exist by the Weimar government, so they were disbanded. As a result, many of these regiments formed ostensibly peaceful agricultural and industrial organizations, some even opening businesses together³². Evidently many kept a desire to overthrow the republican government of Germany, as some participants of the Baltic Adventure also supported the later Kapp Putsch.

Many criticize the Treaty of Versailles, and they are probably right to. The common complaint are the war reparations, but the limitations put upon Germany's military may have done it more harm in the long term. The unemployed former soldiers of the Reich often joined these rowdy freikorps, which as we have seen caused great damage at home and abroad. Their impact on German society and the growing opposition to the fledgling Weimar government had significant impact on the development of Nazism, as the title of Waite's *Vanguard of Nazism* would suggest. Less obvious however is the effect of their hypermasculinity and "freebooter" spirit, in addition to their dangerous irredentist sentiment towards the Baltic that would likely influence the Nazi concept of a "Greater Germany".

Endnotes

1. Andrejs Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 34.
2. Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 97.
3. Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 8.
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5. Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 16.
6. "Reinhard-brigade Recruiting Poster from 1919." Digital image. Wikipedia. Accessed November 28, 2016.
<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f0/WWIposter10.jpg>
7. David Crowe, *The Baltic States and the Great Powers: Foreign Relations, 1938-1940* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 1.
8. David Crowe, *The Baltic States and the Great Powers: Foreign Relations, 1938-1940* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 7.
9. Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 104.
10. Gustav Noske, Von Keil bis Kapp, *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Revolution* (Berlin, 1938), 144, quoted in Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 105.
11. Arnolt Bronnen, *Rosbach*. (Berlin: E. Rowohlt, 1930), 70, quoted in Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 106.
12. Annemarie Sammartino, *The Impossible Border: Germany and the East, 1914-1922*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 50.
13. Annemarie Sammartino, *The Impossible Border: Germany and the East, 1914-1922*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 48.
14. Andrejs Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 45.
15. Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 107.
16. Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 109.

17. Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 113.
18. Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 114.
19. Andrejs Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 36.
20. Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 118.
21. Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 119.
22. Maximilian Scheer, *Blut Und Ehre*. (Paris: Editions Du Carrefour, 1937), 44, quoted in Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 182.
23. Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 181.
24. Ernst von Salomon, *Die Geächteten*. (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1930), 110, quoted in Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 128.
25. Klaus Theweleit, *Male fantasies Vol. 1* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 23.
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27. Josef Bischoff, *Die Letzte Front: Geschichte Der Eisernen Division Im Baltikum 1919*. (Berlin, 1936), 78, quoted in Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 110.
28. David Crowe, *The Baltic States and the Great Powers: Foreign Relations, 1938-1940* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 3.
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30. Ernst von Salomon, *Die Geächteten*. (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1930), 144-145, quoted in Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 131.
31. Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 131.
32. Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923*. (New York: Norton, 1969), 138.