

THE OUTLAWS

(ERNST VON SALOMON)

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The Outlaws is advertised to modern readers as a memoir of the post-World War I struggles between the armed German Left and Right, between the Communists and the *Freikorps*. But it's not. The *Freikorps* appear some; the Communists little, and often when they do, as quasi-friends of some on the Right. Rather, this is a personal memoir of Ernst von Salomon's growing up in the 1920s, and follows his life, of which *Freikorps* conflict inside Germany was a small part. The book instead narrates his participation in postwar government-sponsored *Freikorps* fighting defending the Baltic Germans; his involvement in the assassination of Walther Rathenau, foreign minister of the Weimar Republic; and his resulting time in prison. All of these are surrounded by the introspective reflections of a right-wing German of 1930, which is what makes them interesting.

The Outlaws is not even technically a memoir. It's written as a novel with an unnamed narrator. But it seems entirely obvious that the narrator is von Salomon himself, and the events precisely track real events, as far as I can tell. Presumably, given this book was published shortly after the author was released from prison and was being closely watched by the authorities, this artifice was adopted for self-protection. It does mean the reader can never be sure what is real, or where von Salomon may have stretched the truth. But that's true for all memoirs.

The book's first few pages set the tone for the rest of the book, which to a modern reader is often one of some confusion, because the author assumes the reader is intimately familiar with the events described, and so provides no background or context, and often omits details necessary to fully understand what is happening. Von Salomon, at the beginning of the book a sixteen-year-old military cadet, was born in Kiel, a Baltic seaport and headquarters of the German navy, and what the first chapter appears to describe is the events of the Kiel Mutiny of November 1916, as seen from his street-level perspective. The Kiel Mutiny, started by sailors (who throughout the twentieth century often were a nucleus of left-wing violence, as in 1930s Spain), purported to rule Kiel through a Bolshevik-inspired "workers' and soldiers council," and

inspired similar leftist attempts to seize power throughout Germany. The result was the German Revolution, in which the Kaiser abdicated and a Republic formed, under the control of the Social Democrats (SPD). The SPD was the mainstream party of the Left, who largely opposed the Communists and wholly opposed their armed revolts (unlike America's mainstream party of the left today, which endorses the modern instantiations of both).

This is the Weimar Republic, to which present-day America is often analogized. Whatever the accuracy of that comparison, and despite the present treason by today's Democrats similar to that of the Communists of 1919, our society bears very little resemblance to that Germany where, as von Salomon says, "everything was possible and nothing was certain." We may yet get there, perhaps in November, but our wealthy, aged, risk-averse, feminized society is a very far cry from the chaotic early 1920s ferment in which von Salomon grew up fast. Still, it is worth knowing how men think in a society in chaos, especially a Western society in chaos, even one quite different from 2020 America.

Gustav Noske, a veteran SPD politician with an interest in military affairs, took charge of defusing the Kiel Mutiny, and did so successfully. He then assumed control of both what was left of the army, and more importantly, of the *Freikorps* units, which he used to cement the Republic's authority and put down further Communist attempts to establish a totalitarian state. *Freikorps* units are often called right-wing paramilitaries, and many were, but at first they were mostly parallel organizations to the fractured army, well-trained and adequately equipped. In von Salomon's telling, quite a few of the soldiers were in fact socialists of one stripe or another, and what bound them politically was primarily dissatisfaction with the ruling classes. It was *Freikorps* soldiers, under Noske's command, who put down the Spartacist Communist revolution in Berlin, in January 1918, and executed (as they deserved) Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Von Salomon, who had volunteered for *Freikorps* duty, the army no longer taking volunteers, participated in defeating the Berlin Communists, and again he offers a short, chaotic, street-level chapter on the Spartacist revolt. Aside from the fighting, what he emphasizes is how many Berliners, among the death and chaos, continued to enjoy themselves, ignoring the fighting. "They danced their feverish, erotic dances on glassy floors, while the last stray shots

of our companions were still sounding in the distance.” This sense of both being part of a hardened elite surrounded by decadence, and of contempt for the selfish who do not have Germany’s interests at heart, permeates the book.

For a short while after breaking the Communists, Noske’s *Freikorps* was used for police actions, such as the search of workers’ tenement blocks for illegal weapons (an episode von Salomon describes in interesting detail). As the Weimar Republic stabilized, and the terms imposed on Germany by the victorious Allies were made known, men in the *Freikorps* of von Salomon’s bent—that is, right-wing and eager for action they were not finding as policemen—found each other. Thus, von Salomon and a few dozen of his companions left (illicitly or not, it is not clear) to go fight for Germany in the Baltic States.

This is a forgotten episode from history—the little wars between ethnic Germans and other Balts, nationalist and Communist, as well as the Russians, in Courland and elsewhere, immediately after World War I. Von Salomon appears to have mostly fought in Latvia, where the Letts (now an obsolete term, I think) and the Estonians fought the Baltic Germans and the Russians. I really have little grasp of this episode, and reading the chapters devoted to it here did not clarify much. (Ever since the Teutonic Knights, the Germans imposed their influence here, forming the ruling class. But they are all gone now.) Again, we get a grunt-level view of the violence, similar in many ways to the memoirs of Erwin Rommel. In August 1919, the new German government, as required by the Allies, repudiated military activity in defense of the Baltic Germans. Most of the German military units obeyed and returned; some, including von Salomon’s, mutinied and remained. Most of them died; von Salomon was among the few to manage to retreat back to Germany.

Von Salomon saw this as a betrayal and the seed in the hearts of men like him of realizing that something was very wrong with the German spirit and German leadership, but what precisely that was remained opaque. For him, a message, a call to action, was forming in the wings, and their task was to wait for it, and be ready. “They stood among the ruins and listened with incredulous astonishment to the catchwords and theories which were hawked about as the treasures of the future and as the wisdom and truth of the present. And since they

learnt under the shadow of death to distinguish truth from falsehood, they were not easily duped.”

This was 1920. Other *Freikorps* groups, more intact, returned from abroad, and here Hermann Ehrhardt, a based chad if there ever was one, first appears. They were all ordered to demobilize, by Noske. Then came the failed Kapp Putsch, in March 1920—and again, we are given a confused, street-level view. In another forgotten episode, Communists in several cities attempted to use the suppression of the Kapp Putsch as yet another opportunity for Red revolt (the Left never misses a chance to seize power). Von Salomon describes how, kicked off the train in Harburg, in Saxony, billeting in the local town hall, his unit was assaulted and defeated by local Communists, with significant loss of life on both sides. We also get a rearward-looking analysis of why the Kapp Putsch failed. “I tried to make the words of the Kapp programme seem real. But there was the rub! The proclamation began with a justification: that hardly indicated conviction! No, it was not the words of his programme which called us to fight. What was it, then? It was simply that we enjoyed danger. . . . We did not know what would happen; but how should we ever know except by finding out?” Von Salomon knew the SPD had disbanded the *Freikorps* as a defensive measure after the putsch; he did not know that Ehrhardt had in response formed Organisation Consul, a secret group whose aim was overthrow of the Republic by violence.

Von Salomon went to Hamburg, and was further whipped to rage by the French occupation of the town. In his telling it was here, after a confrontation with French soldiers, he met Erwin Kern, leader of the later conspiracy to assassinate Rathenau. Von Salomon describes how a small circle of like-minded young men grew, all of them working menial, flexible jobs to support themselves for their real work. He describes how very many organizations were recruiting and growing on the Right, “patriotic groups,” with whom he sympathized in general, but who had vague and unrealistic goals—they were dreamers, not doers, merely congregating and yammering because they “felt they had been betrayed and cheated by fate.” From these groups, his smaller group poached members, looking for young men of courage bored by the endless talk, and also engaged in street demonstrations and low-level brawling—thereby getting to know some of the Communists, with whom they became “great friends.” This commonality suggests, again,

that opposition to the failed ruling class was the key driver of 1920s right-wing activity, though what was wanted instead doubtless differed between the groups.

They were preparing, even if they didn't know for what. When the government announced a buyback program for rifles, at a hundred marks each, they waylaid people carrying their guns to the police station, and bought them for a hundred and five. They executed a French soldier who had raped the sister of a German. They made friendly contacts in police departments. They undermined the French and engineered prison escapes. Some of them died. In 1921, von Salomon left Germany again, going to Upper Silesia to fight the rebellious Poles, apparently as part of resurrected *Freikorps* units tacitly allowed by the SPD government—and were then, according to von Salomon, betrayed again by the government, which allowed the French to prevent total victory, resulting in many of his friends being cut off behind enemy lines and killed. And toward the end of 1921, he returned to Hamburg.

By this time, Organisation Consul and its sympathizers were in full flower, committing numerous assassinations of left-wing politicians, but also organizing attacks on the French and engaging in various other forms of illegal activity, such as gun-running. As with any such shadowy conspiratorial organization, a cloud of rumor and unknowing surrounded its activities, and its members, and those sympathetic to it, were justifiably suspicious of spies and enemies. The mechanism the "O. C." used to address this, as well as to justify killings of Germans seen as betraying Germany, were the *feme* murders—killings ordered by "courts," that is, by ad hoc groups of right-wing conspirators, in a resurrection of a medieval German Westphalian practice of secret private courts, the Vehmic courts. Von Salomon mostly conceals the specifics of his own actions, pointing instead to the actions of others, merely emphasizing that none of them cared about "official affairs" anymore, that is, normal politics. Rathenau, in a foreshadowing, appears repeatedly, as von Salomon reads his books and watches his speeches—with favor, not loathing, even though the Republic was an object of contempt for the Right.

At some length, von Salomon narrates his own participation in an attempted *feme* murder, of a mole in their organization, where the victim was beaten and almost drowned, but then released. (I am quite sure that

is not as easy to kill someone as young men often think, emotionally.) Here the book turns to some combination of self-analysis and justification. “We realised fully what we were doing, we accepted the curse under which we had fallen—that violence breeds violence, and that we could not withdraw from our chosen path. Indeed, we felt a sense of duty in carrying out a historical purpose, which, while it relieved us of no personal responsibility, gave our actions an added excitement.” “We are not fighting to make the nation happy—we are fighting to force it to tread in the path of its destiny.”

Kern seems to have been von Salomon’s philosophical lodestar; certainly, von Salomon quotes him extensively, though who knows if the quotes are manufactured? There is much talk of duty and so forth, but at core what these men seemed to have wanted is, in their own words, “the domination of the world by Germany.” Opposing this goal they saw a variety of forces—but, odd to us given what we are told today, the Jews were not an important one, and barely get a mention. I doubt if von Salomon, at least at this time, was more anti-Semitic than Franklin Roosevelt (and in fact, he later had a long-term Jewish girlfriend). Instead, they directed their hate at those who would not stand up to the Allies, and to those who weakened the moral fiber of Germany. They were happy to ally with Communists against the “propertied classes,” and spoke of the “collectivism that will give the last farthing of value to every member of the nation,” which would also be “a socialisation through which we shall regain that intellectual unity which was stolen from us in the nineteenth century.” Fascinatingly, their target is those who “utter the word ‘Germany’ and mean ‘Europe’—their true motherland.” Today, everything old is new again, if with a fresh coloration.

For this reason Kern and his group made Rathenau, whom they still greatly admired, the focus of their anger. At least it seems like this was the reason, but it is actually quite confused and unclear why Rathenau was targeted. If you read about Kern, about whom relatively little information seems readily available today, it appears he said at his trial that his motivations included the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and that Rathenau’s sister was married to the Communist Karl Radek (which was untrue). Von Salomon, though, says Kern, before the assassination, gave those as examples of laughable false reasons von Salomon should offer after Kern’s death, since “They’ll never understand our real motives.”

Regardless of reasons why Rathenau was the target, the clear political objective of assassinating Rathenau was to spark a revolution, to light “a beacon to rouse men to further action.” Maybe the reasons were simply secondary to the objective. In any case, after various preparations, from which von Salomon was largely excluded, Kern and two others assassinated Rathenau in June, 1922, shooting him in broad daylight on the street, using a car that von Salomon had obtained.

The result was the exact opposite of what Kern and his co-conspirators wanted. No support was offered by anyone, much less a right-wing revolution. “The army which Kern had hoped to raise by his deed was destroyed by it.” Instead, a massive manhunt was launched. Kern and Hermann Fischer, the other shooter, were cornered in a derelict castle; Kern was either killed by a lucky shot or killed himself, whereupon Fischer shot himself. The manhunt rolled up all the conspirators, including von Salomon, who gives a lengthy, fevered description of his feelings while on the run. He was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison.

Although the epigraph for this last section of the memoir is a quote from Ernst Jünger, “The ruin of his hopes leaves the steadfast man undismayed,” oddly this last section is nothing but a catalog of introspective dismay, ranging all the way to mental breakdown. Von Salomon served his time working at piecework in a private room in a old and clammy prison. I’m sure this was very unpleasant, but really, what did he expect? Play stupid games, win stupid prizes, and there doesn’t appear to have been any abuse or extraordinary hardship, other than being imprisoned—except when he was put in a freezing punishment cell for attacking a guard. He was upset that “outside, life was going on feverishly, [and] my friends were grappling with the problems that alone made life worthwhile.” He made friends with more Communists. He got almost no news; but he noticed the 1923 hyperinflation from the huge numbers on postage stamps. He got a letter, after two years, from an unnamed compatriot, who narrated how all his old companions had scattered or been killed. Finally, in 1927, he got out, only to receive another sentence for the attempted *feme* murder of the mole. Fortunately for him, within a few months he was pardoned, and returned to civilian life. But not to his old life—“the outlaws’ campaign was at an end. . . . It was all over and it had all been in vain.”

Von Salomon didn't change his politics. But like many of the right wing in 1930s Germany, he rejected Hitler, earning a living as a writer (including of film scripts). The National Socialists saw him, it appears correctly, as an advocate of Strasserism, roughly a focus on anti-capitalism, often with an anti-Semitic bent. This was a type of Third Positionism, an attempt, more or less, to combine right-wing cultural views with left-wing economic views. Think hyper-Bannonism. Many Strasserites were killed by the Nazis in the Night of the Long Knives, along with other opponents (Hermann Erhardt, another anti-Nazi, barely escaped), but von Salomon managed to get through the war years unscathed by keeping his head down. He is most famous for a book he wrote after the war—*Der Fragebogen (The Questionnaire)*, about the denazification process required by the Allies, in which he, sarcastically and at length, attacks victors' justice and criticizes Allied behavior (including mistreatment of his Jewish girlfriend). I haven't read that book; given that it apparently narrates much of the author's life, perhaps it sheds light on the episodes found in *The Outlaws*. Von Salomon died in 1972; a life, it seems, that accomplished nothing of what he sought.

What can we learn from all this? Two things, I think: history rhymes, and that the Left's narrative of inevitable leftward movement is false. On the first, von Salomon's desperation and bitterness, his seeing no clear path forward, is similar to that of today's American Right. Sure, the specific issues are different, and in Germany the ultimate resolution reached was, um, very undesirable, but von Salomon and his friends were largely correct in their estimation of the Weimar Republic's worthlessness and decadence—and, most importantly, that it was inevitably doomed, but had to be pushed. So with us, and with what is left of America's once-great republic. I suspect, though, that the result for today's Right will be much different, and more favorable, than the result was for von Salomon's Right. For the tides of history go in, and they go out. He was fated to oppose the tides, but the times, they are a-changin'.

And on the second, today's American Left hysterically, desperately preaches that the arc of history leads always farther leftward. This has a certain propaganda value, if you can get people to believe it, but if you make such a belief a tenet of your ideology, you take the Roadrunner risk—that someday, like the Coyote, you will look down, and realize you were wrong about the inevitability of your path, instead plunging to

your doom. The weakest point in this broad leftist myth is the falsehood that the young always skew heavily Left, something easy to disprove historically, but which given the primacy of the 1960s in the lying histories the Left has choked America with, often has a surface plausibility to the uninformed. In truth, the young skew heavily extreme, in the direction of whatever set of abstract principles is made most attractive. Instructively, in Germany, as both Patrick Leigh Fermor and Sebastian Haffner wrote in their books written in the 1930s, it was very common for a young man to convert overnight from Communism to National Socialism. "Saint Marx, in whom one had always believed, had not helped. Saint Hitler was obviously more powerful. So let's destroy the images of Saint Marx on the altars and replace them with images of Saint Hitler."

Today's American young have gotten a raw deal and they know it, even if not all can admit it, least of all to themselves. The Boomers, perhaps the worst generation in all human history, have ruined everything and left the young with no future, except one of endless debt minorly alleviated by consumerism and pornography. It'll work, given there is no apparent immediate alternative and the Boomers have kept their grip on power, until the economy goes into the tank. As it inevitably will, since much of what purports to be GDP is actually a fiction, and real production of value is terrible, something concealed by the massive prevalence of BS jobs.

But what is lacking today in America is a man who will weaponize the young in a rightward direction. The young have been so successfully weaponized in a leftward direction over the past twenty years, as we see in many of them eagerly participating in riots with the maggots and parasites of BLM, but that is a default, the result of years of relentless propagandizing by those who have temporarily managed to capture all the levers of cultural power, including the education system and the popular media. Without a clear alternative and under the spell that limitless emancipation will lead to joy for all, despite evidence to the contrary all around, the young naturally say, and even believe, they are Left. They're not, in any real sense, and the vast majority will abandon the Left if the Right ever gets around to offering a powerful alternative.

The Left is viscerally aware of this danger, which is why they spend a great deal of effort to demonize any movement on the Right that might

grow into such a weaponization—that is, any trend or offering on the Right that is not merely a flaccid outgrowth of the aged, catamite Right of the Heritage Foundation and Jeff Flake’s Republican Party. In the long run, which is probably now the short run, this strategy will not work. As soon as there is a crisis, someone will weaponize the young for the Right, and that quick smart. It will be interesting. I am looking forward to it.