

Schwarze Scharen: Anarcho-Syndicalist Militias in Germany, 1929–1933

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Historical Background

The roots of the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Germany date back to the union movement of the nineteenth century. As opposed to the big centralist unions under the influence of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), anarcho-syndicalists were strongly based in class struggle, antimilitarism, and federalism. During World War I, the anarcho-syndicalists were the first union activists to speak out against the war. After 1918, they recruited many new members, and important anarcho-syndicalist unions emerged in Berlin, Saxony, Thuringia, Rhineland, and the Ruhr Valley. Soon, they united in the Freie Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands (Free Workers' Union of Germany, FAUD). At its peak in the early 1920s, the FAUD had about 150,000 members. Many of them were unemployed, and there was a lot of agitation on the streets, mainly outside of government offices. This led to an activism that was very different from that of the regular union movement.

The growing popularity of the FAUD led the centralist unions, which were organized in the Allgemeine Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (ADGB), to actively undermine the FAUD's organizing efforts. Workers were forced to join social democratic unions under the threat of being denounced to bosses or the police otherwise. ADGB-affiliated workers

even went on strike to have management lay off their anarcho-syndicalist colleagues. As a result, FAUD membership had dropped to ten thousand by the end of the 1920s, when anarcho-syndicalists were faced with an even more worrisome development: the rise of the National Socialist movement.

Schwarze Scharen

In light of the increasing Nazi threat, different workers' militias for self-defense were formed. The largely social democratic Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold (The Banner of the Reich: Black, Red, and Gold) and the communist Rote Frontkämpferbund (League of Red Front Fighters) were founded in 1924. In 1929, they were joined by little-known anarcho-syndicalist militias, which called themselves the *Schwarze Scharen* (roughly, Black Drovers).¹

Members of the Schwarze Scharen wore arms and uniforms consisting of black boots, black pants, black shirts, and black berets. They engaged with Nazis in street fights and provided security at meetings and events, mainly of the FAUD and the Syndikalistisch-Anarchistische Jugend Deutschlands (Syndicalist-Anarchist Youth of Germany, SAJD). The FAUD cofounder and famed anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker was looked after by Schwarze Scharen more than once. Some groups also prepared for prolonged armed confrontations with the Nazis.

Those who joined the Schwarze Scharen saw fascism as a serious threat, not least to the working class; they tried to mobilize fellow workers to join their ranks. In July 1930, the Schwarze Scharen of Berlin-Brandenburg issued the following appeal:

Are you aware of the consequences of your passivity? Comrade, don't get us wrong! We do not fear for the Schwarzen Scharen. We are well established and our organizational structure is strong. We will not disappear. But think about the following: many workers act in the same way as you. But by being passive you sabotage our work; you get in the way of an effort that counts on your solidarity. As a class-conscious proletarian, can you with a clear conscience let a promising movement, equipped with the most useful of weapons, advance by itself? Can you with a clear conscience join this movement only when it has become a mass movement and done its deeds? Come on, comrade, make an effort yourself!²

The Schwarze Scharen were founded on anarcho-syndicalist principles and they were close to the FAUD, but they organized autonomously. While in some regions, especially in Upper Silesia, local FAUD groups often overlapped with the Schwarze Scharen, there were stronger divisions in other places. Some groups of the Schwarze Scharen also had members without an anarcho-syndicalist—or any union—background. Many members were young, which is why the Schwarze Scharen were often referred to as a “youth organization,” yet the average age was almost thirty.

The only Schwarze Scharen charter that survived the Nazi regime—ironically, at the Prussian Secret State Archives—was the one issued by the Berlin-Brandenburg group. It read as follows:

1. The Schwarze Scharen are an anti-fascist association of revolutionary workers.
2. Without reservation, they stand behind the principles of syndicalism and its organizations, that is, the FAUD and the SAJD.
3. They see themselves as a supplement to the named movements and as a protective force against fascism and the enemies of anarcho-syndicalism.
4. First and foremost, they consider it their duty to rally against fascism and to propagate libertarian socialism by means of education.
5. Any worker can become a member of the Schwarze Scharen.
6. The Schwarze Scharen have a federal structure. Individual groups consist of eight members. They form the basis of the federation. Any four additional members constitute a new group. Each group has a leader and an assistant leader. Three groups form a section. Each section elects a leader from the membership. Four sections form a Hundertschaft.³ The leader of a Hundertschaft must be elected from the section leaders. The Hundertschaft leaders in one district form an administrative board.
7. Any leader can be dismissed at any time by a simple majority vote in the respective group, section, or Hundertschaft.
8. Each member pays a fee of fifty pfennig a month. The fee has to be paid to the group leader during the first week of

the month. Each new member must pay an admission fee of twenty-five pfennig.

9. If a member violates a group's principles, guidelines, or resolutions, or if he engages in behavior that harms the organization or his comrades, he can be expelled.
10. The organization can only be dissolved by a general assembly that has to be announced to all members fourteen days in advance and only by a two-thirds majority vote. In the case of dissolution, all assets of the organization will be transferred to the FAUD and SAJD.⁴

The relationship between the FAUD and the Schwarzen Scharen was not without tensions. These can be summarized as follows:

1. For the FAUD, the revolution could only start with a general strike. In the opinion of the Schwarze Scharen, a general strike had to be accompanied by an armed struggle extending beyond workplace disputes and industrial centers.
2. Some FAUD members criticized the Schwarze Scharen for their martial appearance and violent behavior.
3. Some FAUD members feared that the Schwarze Scharen would turn into a vanguard-type rival anarcho-syndicalist organization, in the worst case replicating Bolshevism.

However, there was also widespread support for the Schwarze Scharen within the FAUD, as the following leaflet handed out in Berlin in 1930 reveals:

Comrade, what is *your* take on the Schwarze Scharen?

Not long ago, FAUD comrades in Upper Silesia founded an *anti-fascist association*. It took only a short time for this organization, which calls itself Schwarze Scharen, to recruit a much wider circle of active comrades than the local FAUD chapter. In Southern and Central Germany and in the Rhineland similar groups have emerged. Also in Berlin-Brandenburg. Do we believe that the existence of armed organizations is justified? Our answer is yes. We feel that, especially at a time when National Socialism is on the rise, we have to answer this question in the affirmative.

In the FAUD, we have so far not been able to reach bigger masses of workers because we have no solid circle of active comrades who, well versed in the politics of the day, are able to recruit in workers' quarters.

We, who are sincerely trying to promote the FAUD, have realized that it is mandatory to be active where workers live, to use modern means of propaganda (bands, theater groups, posters, wall newspapers, and, in rural areas, sound trucks), and to organize the self-protection of the proletariat.

*Join the Schwarze Scharen!*⁵

Support came also from prominent figures in the radical milieu. In his journal *Fanal*, the well-known anarchist writer and agitator Erich Mühsam said the following about the Schwarze Scharen in November 1930:

In response to concerns that have been raised: if, almost at the same time and independently from one another, antiauthoritarian youth in Silesia, Kassel, and Berlin—and probably other places as well—form “Schwarze Scharen” in order to turn the “defense” of the working class against fascism into *physical* defense, then there must be a reason for it. *Fanal* has no cause to give the young anarchist comrades of the Schwarzen Scharen a moral lecture; we can only send our regards and encourage them.⁶

Although the charter of the Schwarze Scharen group of Berlin-Brandenburg is the only one that survived, the group itself was short-lived. It encountered more than the usual resistance from the local FAUD chapter. In general, it was easier for the Schwarze Scharen to establish themselves in places where FAUD groups were small. Therefore, the most influential groups of Schwarze Scharen hailed from Upper Silesia (the center of the movement), Wuppertal in the Ruhr Valley, and Kassel in Hesse.

Upper Silesia

Upper Silesia—today a part of Poland—was one of the historically most reactionary regions of Germany. This also meant that workers' organizations were forced to develop particularly militant forms of action, which, in turn, helped the formation of the Schwarze Scharen in the



Schwarze Scharen in Ratibor, 1929. The banner, calling for a rally, reads: “The proletarian revolution will restore the unity of Upper Silesia. Workers of all countries, liberate yourselves from the oppressors!” Credit: German Anarcho-Syndicalist Archive.

late 1920s. Another factor working in favor of the Schwarze Scharen was that many militant workers were fed up with the authoritarian structures of the communist parties; they were looking for more flexible organizations.

The first group of Schwarze Scharen was founded in the town of Ratibor (Racibórz) in October 1929. It had about forty members and was always the most active Schwarze Scharen group. One of its main activities was to embark on tours in the region to inspire new groups. Ratibor’s Schwarze Scharen would appear on the back of trucks in small towns and, according to a police report, wave banners proclaiming “Down with the State.”⁷ They also seemed to have a talent for agitprop. At an anti-war protest in August 1930, a carriage was equipped with self-made drawings, including a figure of Jesus Christ with a gas mask, and with a puppet representing Paul von Hindenburg, the German president, smoking a long pipe and wearing a nightgown and slippers. The artworks were confiscated by the police and charges were filed.

The significance of the Upper Silesia Schwarze Scharen for militant anti-fascist resistance rivaled that of the regional Rote Frontkämpferbund. In Ratibor, Schwarze Scharen outnumbered Communist Party members at a joint anti-fascist demonstration in April 1930. In Beuthen (Bytom), one of the region’s major towns,

the militant anarcho-syndicalists were at times the most powerful anti-fascist force. And in Katscher (Kietrz), a small town of only ten thousand people, the mayor complained in 1932: “On every occasion—especially when bans on demonstrations, marches, and meetings are lifted—communists and, in particular, syndicalists terrorize Katscher in a way that probably only few towns of its size experience.”⁸

In fact, the Schwarze Scharen became so popular that the communists started to turn against them as well, especially since many former Communist Party members were filling their ranks. In 1931, the FAUD journal *Der Syndikalist* published a report under the headline “The Struggle for Upper Silesia.” It included the following lines:

Our comrades are repeatedly attacked while demonstrating outside the unemployment office. Sometimes, they are outnumbered twenty to one. When, on one occasion, nine drunken thugs were repelled in a rougher manner by two Schwarze Scharen members, the nine proceeded to attack a FAUD members’ meeting with knives. It is only thanks to the Schwarze Scharen that the FAUD in Upper Silesia is able to defend itself against these fascist-like terror attacks.⁹

However, the Nazis remained the biggest threat, and since the Schwarze Scharen in Upper Silesia wanted to be prepared for the Nazi Party seizing power, they began to store explosives. In May 1932, based on an informant’s tip, the police made several house searches in the region, confiscating dynamite cartridges, blasting caps, and fuses. The material came from sympathetic miners who had stolen it at work. Some Schwarze Scharen members escaped to foreign countries, others were convicted in court. It was the beginning of the end of the organization in Upper Silesia.

Wuppertal

In Wuppertal in the Ruhr Valley, the Schwarze Scharen regularly got into armed confrontations with Nazis. A November 1931 incident was described in *Der Syndikalist*:

On Friday, November 13, at about 11 p.m., these [Nazi] brutes attacked without any reason members of the Reichsbanner. When, right at that moment, five of our comrades passed by,

the bandits let go and, under loud threats, turned on our comrades instead. Comrade Huhn suffered a deep cut from brass knuckles right above his eye. When more thugs arrived from the nearby SA barracks, the nineteen-year-old comrade Eugen Benner fired four shots. This put an end to the rowdiness and the warlike ballyhoo of the SA minions. Instantly, they backed off, and eighty “Hitler guards” ran in panic from an advancing nineteen-year-old anarchist. Eventually, Benner was arrested by a police patrol.¹⁰

Benner was put on trial and sentenced to three months in prison. The judge conceded that he had acted in self-defense but charged him for carrying an illegal weapon. Eventually, the sentence was reduced to three weeks. A year later, another Wuppertal Schwarze Scharen member, Helmut Kirsche, was sentenced for injuring a Nazi. Kirsche, who had also acted in self-defense, had shot a Nazi attacker in the leg. He was sentenced to four months in prison.

The status of the Schwarze Scharen in Wuppertal was unique in terms of their militancy. They prevented many fascist attacks on meetings and working-class neighborhoods. What they lacked in numbers, they made up in dedication. Their bold acts also served as a psychological weapon. As an activist remembered: “The SA took us for stronger than we were; they were afraid of us.”¹¹

Kassel

The Schwarze Scharen in Kassel, Hesse, distinguished themselves by publishing influential anarcho-syndicalist propaganda material, producing two periodicals. *Die proletarische Front—Kampforgan der Schwarzen Schar* (The Proletarian Front—Militant Publication by the Schwarze Schar) was their main journal; it appeared from 1930 to 1933. In 1930, a smaller journal titled *Die schwarze Horde* (The Black Horde) was also released. The journals were produced under difficult circumstances, as a 1931 article in *Der Syndikalist* reveals:

Since the founding of our anti-fascist and revolutionary Schwarze Scharen group, we have been harassed without end by the police and the courts. Our journal *Die proletarische Front* has been banned, so we can only distribute it with enormous trouble.

Issues are confiscated, distributors arrested, fines handed out.... The machinery of the justice system is coming at us with full steam.¹²

Eventually, a prosecutor in Kassel, calling *Die proletarische Front* a “demagogic publication full of defamations of the republic and its servants,” demanded prison terms of several months for the editors Willy Paul and Hermann Hannibal. However, he failed to convince a jury of laymen, who apparently didn’t consider phrases such as “a republic of fat cats and money bags” to be libel. Willy Paul propagated anarchist principles throughout the trial. Anarcho-syndicalists across the country felt giddy about a jury in Kassel ruling in two anarchists’ favor.¹³ It was a small victory in a battle doomed to fail.

Conclusion

In comparison to the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold and the Rote Frontkämpferbund, the federation of the Schwarze Scharen was small. It never had more than a few hundred members. There was no common administrative body, and there were no common charters or congresses. Contact between groups was loose and no group existed for more than four years. After the Nazis took power in March 1933, no group was able to withstand the repression and the brutality of the regime. Even before the Nazi Party’s rise to power, many members of the Schwarze Scharen had already been arrested, not least in the wake of the discovery of explosives in Upper Silesia. Yet the Schwarze Scharen occupy an important place in the history of militant anarcho-syndicalist anti-fascism. Many Schwarze Scharen made a difference, and they raised important and timeless questions for militant anti-fascist organizing: How to unite different tactics? How to keep a common line? What is the role of the unions? What is the role of the working class? Which are the sites of anarcho-syndicalist struggle?

Even if the Schwarze Scharen didn’t exist long enough to provide any answers to these questions, there can’t be any doubt about the genuineness of their anti-fascist convictions. Many former members continued the anti-fascist struggle in the underground resistance against the Nazis or as volunteers in the Spanish Civil War.

Regardless of the historical circumstances people find themselves in, the need for militant anti-fascism always remains.

Notes

- 1 *Scharen* is plural. One “drove” is a *Schar*.
- 2 *Mitteilungsblatt der Schwarzen Scharen* (Bulletin of the S.S.), no. 3, July 1930. All translations from German by Gabriel Kuhn.
- 3 *Hundertschaft* is an old German military term for units of about a hundred men.
- 4 Geheimes Staatsarchiv—Preußischer Kulturbesitz (GStA), Bestand I HA, Rep. 219, Nr. 72, Bl. 26–27.
- 5 GStA, Bestand I HA, Rep. 219, Nr. 72, Bl. 37.
- 6 *Fanal*, no. 2, 1930, 48.
- 7 GStA, Bestand I HA, Rep. 219, Nr. 140.
- 8 Quoted from Helge Döhring, “Syndikalismus in Katscher/Schlesien,” *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Syndikalismusforschung*, no. 3, 2013, 92.
- 9 *Der Syndikalist*, no. 40, 1931.
- 10 *Der Syndikalist*, no. 48, 1931.
- 11 Ulrich Linse, “Die ‘Schwarzen Scharen’—eine antifaschistische Kampforganisation deutscher Anarchisten,” in *Archiv für die Geschichte des Widerstandes und der Arbeit*, no. 9, 1989, 56.
- 12 *Der Syndikalist*, no. 12, 1931.
- 13 *Der Syndikalist*, no. 33, 1931.