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The Captain of Köpenick and the Uniform Fantasies of German Militarism

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Few events in Imperial Germany's forty-plus years of existence have been remembered with as much pride and hilarity as the one that took place on October 16, 1906. It began shortly after noon, when a man dressed in a captain's uniform appeared on the streets in the northern part of Berlin and commandeered two small contingents of soldiers returning to their barracks from guard duty. Claiming to be acting on instructions from the kaiser himself, the man ordered the ten soldiers to accompany him to Köpenick, a small but growing city on the southeastern outskirts of Berlin. Arriving in front of city hall around 3:30 p.m., he assigned four of the men to take up positions at the three entrances of the building to ensure that no one entered or left without his permission. The remaining troops followed him inside, where he instructed two men to secure the ground floor. Heading upstairs, he encountered an off-duty constable, who, along with other police officials, was given the task of controlling the growing crowd of curious gawkers that had begun to amass in the plaza and streets outside. With these arrangements set, he barged into the offices of the mayor and other top officials, announcing their arrest on the kaiser's orders and stationing soldiers outside their doors. Within an hour, he arranged to have the mayor and city treasurer transported by carriage to the Neue Wache, the main guardhouse in central Berlin. After issuing orders for the remaining soldiers to withdraw at 6:00 p.m., the unidentified captain disappeared into the night with the contents of the city's cash box, totaling 3557 marks and 45 pfennig.

If the heist in Köpenick was carried out with military precision, the response it generated resembled a three-ring circus. As the carriages arrived at the Neue Wache, General Kuno von Moltke, the commandant of Berlin, rushed from his nearby office to greet the mayor and apologize for the error. While the army ordered a disciplinary investigation into the soldiers' behavior, the Berlin police launched a nationwide manhunt to identify and apprehend the perpetrator. In contrast to these official responses, most Germans initially reacted to the event with glee. In southwest Germany, the *Freiburger Zeitung* carried its first article with the headline "Unbelievable!," while Coburg's local paper reported that "everywhere one goes, people are speaking of nothing else than the successful swindle (*Gaunerstreich*) of the fake Captain of Köpenick."¹ Closer to the scene of the crime, the *Berliner Volks-Zeitung* predicted that the "Köpenickiade" would likely "provoke an inextinguishable laughter in Berlin, in all of Germany, even in the entire civilized world," an assessment reiterated in the *New York Times*'s first headline: "Germany Sees the Joke. Even if the Laugh Is on Her."² Indeed, the Metropol

¹ "Kassenraub im Köpenicker Rathaus," *Coburger Zeitung*, October 21, 1906.

² See "Ein unerhörter Gaunerstreich," *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, October 17, 1906, morning edition; "Die Komödie von Köpenick," *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, October 17, 1906, evening edition; "Germany Sees the Joke," *New York Times*, October 18, 1906.

Theater, Berlin's most popular cabaret, almost immediately wove a short skit about the event into its current show, while the major satirical magazines all devoted special issues to the fake captain and his escape.³

The celebration of the "Captain of Köpenick" continued even after the Berlin police finally identified and apprehended the perpetrator ten days later, on October 26. Yet despite Wilhelm Voigt's long criminal record, which included forgery, breaking and entering, and attempted armed robbery, the audacious stunt in Köpenick transformed him overnight into a modern folk hero. Not only was his trial a major media event, but newspapers helped to keep him in the public eye until he received an unexpected pardon from Kaiser Wilhelm II in August 1908. Along with his own best-selling memoir, Voigt's story became the basis for numerous creative works.⁴ In just the final two months of 1906 at least ten evening-length plays and two short films appeared.⁵ Though these early works have largely been forgotten, Voigt's life and deeds remain enshrined in two enduring pieces—a novel by Wilhelm Schäfer and a play by Carl Zuckmayer—which both appeared in 1930, in time to mark the event's twenty-fifth anniversary.⁶

Despite the carnivalesque celebration of this crime, the "Köpenickiade" and its aftermath raised two important issues for Imperial Germans and historians after them. The first concerned the extent of Prussian-German militarism, in particular, civilians' deference to army officers and the inculcation of military values throughout civil society.⁷ Indeed, Voigt's fraud has gone down in German historiography as the most blatant illustration of militarism's widespread hold over German society, with David Blackbourn concluding that "a better demonstration of [Germans'] servile mentality could hardly have been invented."⁸ The second revolved around the authoritarian state, particularly in matters of criminal justice policy. Following Voigt's apprehension, for instance, the public was not only shocked by the length of his earlier prison sentences, but also dismayed to learn that overzealous police supervision had prevented him from reintegrating into society following his recent release from prison in February 1906.⁹

More recently, however, some historians have troubled these prevailing views. For example, Benjamin Carter Hett argues that Voigt's court case "demonstrates the remarkable transformation" taking place in German criminal law, including "a greater concern with the social ends of law" on the part of judges and civil servants in the justice ministry.¹⁰ Similarly, Warren Rosenblum has documented how public outrage over Voigt's longstanding treatment by police supported ongoing changes to police supervision and the growth of welfare organizations for formerly incarcerated individuals.¹¹ Most provocatively, Benjamin Ziemann

³ See Winfried Löschburg, *Ohne Glanz und Gloria. Die Geschichte des "Hauptmanns von Köpenick"* (Berlin: Buchverlag Der Morgen, 1978), 100–12.

⁴ Wilhelm Voigt, *Wie ich Hauptmann von Köpenick wurde* (Leipzig and Berlin: Julius Püttmann, 1909).

⁵ These early works include P. W. Spassmüller, *Gubalke auf der Spur oder Der Hauptmann von Köpenick: Olympische Komödie* (Berlin-Steglitz: Quehl, 1906); Gustav Westphal, "Hauptmann v. Köpenick." *Tragikomödie in 4 Handlungen und 1 Soldaten-Intermezzo* (Danzig: G. Macholz, 1906). For a listing of additional plays, see Roswitha Flatz, *Krieg im Frieden. Das aktuelle Militärstück auf dem Theater des deutschen Kaiserreichs* (Frankfurt/Main: V. Klostermann, 1976), 307.

⁶ Wilhelm Schäfer, *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick* (Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1931); Carl Zuckmayer, *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick. Des Teufels General* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992).

⁷ The scholarly literature on German militarism is extensive. For a recent overview, see Roger Chickering, "Militarism and Radical Nationalism," in *Imperial Germany, 1871–1918*, ed. James Retallack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁸ David Blackbourn, *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany, 1780–1918* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 375.

⁹ Voigt initially found a job in the city of Wismar, until the local police, which viewed him as a threat, summarily deported him from all of Mecklenburg. Only after he was also ordered by the police to leave Berlin did he decide to execute the swindle in Köpenick. See Warren Rosenblum, *Beyond the Prison Gates: Punishment and Welfare in Germany, 1850–1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 107.

¹⁰ Benjamin Carter Hett, "The 'Captain of Köpenick' and the Transformation of German Criminal Justice, 1891–1914," *Central European History* 36, no. 1 (2003): 3–4.

¹¹ Rosenblum, *Beyond the Prison Gates*, 103–19.

contests interpretations of Voigt's con as evidence for a pervasive militaristic mindset among German civilians.¹² In contrast, he points to the theatrical elements of Voigt's military takeover of Köpenick's city hall—and its immediate reproduction on German stages—to draw the opposite conclusion: “that militarism was not a social formation but rather a popular role play,” a mere piece of humorous theater.¹³

Though Ziemann is right to focus on the carnivalesque response to Voigt's stunt, I believe he draws the wrong conclusions about its significance for German militarism. Even with their many theatrical flourishes, con games like Voigt's takeover of Köpenick city hall only resembled theater but in fact worked quite differently. Most notably, while scams and theater both involve staging fantasy scenarios, a con artist seeks to convince his victims that the fantasy is real. Voigt's hoax in Köpenick thus provides an ideal case study for demonstrating how fantasy can be, in Joan Scott's words, “a critically useful tool for historical analysis.”¹⁴ In particular, the concept of fantasy helps historians explain, as Scott Spector has noted, how an “ideology becomes internalized or active in its subjects,” especially “subjects [who] experience themselves as ‘free individuals.’”¹⁵ To get at fantasy's fundamental difference from theater, the first section uses contemporary criminological analyses of con men to reconstruct how Voigt successfully created an elaborate collective fantasy that lasted for several hours and mobilized the willing participation of both victims and accomplices alike. And to the extent that Voigt's hoax not only relied on his performance but also on military law, the history of military-civilian relations, and the long-simmering rumors of a *Staatsstreich*, its success points to the depth of militarism's ideological hold over wide swaths of the population.

But the actions that day in Köpenick tell only half the story. Far more important for assessing the event's relevance for an understanding of militarism as an ideology is the public's subsequent celebration of Voigt as a comic genius and the public pillorying of those he fooled as unmanly dupes. To understand the ideological significance of these responses, the second section follows Spector and Scott in drawing on Slavoj Žižek's theory of ideology as fantasy. In contrast to treatments of ideology that focus on its political content, Žižek argues that ideologies exert their hold over individuals through a “non-sensical, pre-ideological kernel of enjoyment,” by which he means the surplus of pleasure staged by the fantasy: for example, the permission it grants subjects to give in to their aggressive instincts (permission to hate, ridicule, commit violence) or the smug satisfaction that comes from feeling superior to those who were duped.¹⁶ In particular, I argue that the carnivalesque theatricalization of the “Köpenickiade” did not so much mark the limit of German militarism as its continued operation, in particular by underwriting the laughing public's belief that only Voigt's Köpenick victims were under the sway of militarism while they themselves were “free individuals.” Thus, despite the efforts of left-liberal commentators to exploit Köpenick for political purposes, the incident's transformation into a “popular role play” engaged the public in a more stunning theater of self-deception, one that, in the end, strengthened rather than weakened militarism's ideological hold over German society.

¹² Benjamin Ziemann, “Der ‘Hauptmann von Köpenick’—Symbol für den Sozialmilitarismus im wilhelminischen Deutschland?,” in *Grenzüberschreitungen oder der Vermittler Bedrich Loewenstein. Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag eines europäischen Historikers*, ed. V. Precan, M. Janisova, and M. Roeser (Brno and Prag: Ustav pro soudobé dejiny, 1999), 252.

¹³ Ziemann, “Der ‘Hauptmann von Köpenick,’” 261.

¹⁴ Joan Wallach Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 5, 19. On the value of fantasy for historical analysis, see also Lyndal Roper, “Beyond Discourse Theory,” *Women's History Review* 19, no. 2 (April 2010).

¹⁵ Scott Spector, “Was the Third Reich Movie-Made? Interdisciplinarity and the Reframing of ‘Ideology,’” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 2 (2001): 481; emphasis in original.

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso Books, 1989), 124.

Staging the Fantasy of a Military Coup in Köpenick

If theater conjures up an illusion on stage, then fraud constitutes perhaps the ultimate illusion for it turns a figment of the imagination into the appearance of reality itself. Undoubtedly, the kind of fraud that most fascinated Voigt's contemporaries was the "confidence man" or *Hochstapler*.¹⁷ As criminologists of Voigt's day pointed out, the fraud perpetrated by the con man or scam artist deploys many of the same techniques used in theater, such as acting skills and costumes. Yet whereas the illusions on stage may depart radically from the reality of the audience, the con man seeks to create an illusion that, though extraordinary to be sure, remains—at least for those being duped—necessarily *plausible*. Explaining the success of Voigt's hoax, then, requires reconstructing the military and civilian culture that made the illusion of a military takeover of civilian government seem credible to all those directly involved: the soldiers and police, the civil servants and elected officials—as well as the crowds who watched from the streets outside. To mistake Voigt's "Köpenickiade" for mere theater is to miss the way it relied on the material conditions and social expectations of civilian subordination to the army as well as long-simmering fantasies of a military coup.

In assessing similar cases of fraud, German criminologists of the time struggled to explain why con artists were repeatedly successful in convincing people of what would otherwise seem far-fetched lies. In these early days of criminology, explanations often centered on the *Hochstapler* themselves, who were seen as pathological liars endowed with boundless abilities to persuade others: "Like an actor, the liar sinks into his role to the point that he forgets his own self entirely and performs the imaginary role in word and action," making his behavior so convincingly real that those being swindled are easily fooled.¹⁸ And in fact, at his trial testimony and in his autobiography, Voigt did exhibit a tendency to lie, exaggerate, and self-aggrandize so much that even his supporters distanced themselves from some of his claims. In the forward to Voigt's memoir, for instance, the noted author and criminal justice reformer Hans Hyan, who may have ghost-written the book, slyly remarked: "Let it be noted here that even a reader who is not prejudiced one way or another cannot subscribe (*Schritt halten*) to the author's version of events in every detail."¹⁹ In particular, Voigt claimed throughout his trial that his intention behind the Köpenick hoax was to obtain the papers necessary to forge a passport so that he could find work outside of Germany. Despite indications that he had been trying unsuccessfully for months to obtain a passport, the court found this claim "completely unbelievable (*gänzlich unglaubwürdig*)" because passports were handled at the regional level and none of the witnesses at his trial testified that Voigt had made any effort to find the necessary documents in the Rathaus.²⁰

This strategy of building elaborate lies around some small kernel of truth seems to have been a *modus operandi* of *Hochstapler*. The criminal psychologist Hans von Hentig, for example, pointed to Thomas Mann's *Confessions of Felix Krull* (*Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull*) for insights.²¹ "According to my theory," Krull observes, "each deception that doesn't rest on a higher truth is nothing but a bare lie, coarse (*plump*), imperfect and transparent to the first one who comes along. The only deceit that has a chance of being successful and having a vital effect on people is the one that doesn't completely earn the name of deceit

¹⁷ For an etymology of the term concurrent with Voigt's scam, see Hans Gross, *Handbuch für Untersuchungsrichter als System der Kriminalistik*, 5th ed., vol. 1 (Munich: J. Schweitzer Verlag, 1908), 339.

¹⁸ G. Pitz, "Hochstapler," *Der Gendarm. Zeitschrift für die Mitglieder der Königlich Preussischen und reichsländischen Gendarmerie* 1, no. 5 (May 30, 1903): 107. See also Gustav Aschaffenburg, "Zur Psychologie des Hochstaplers," *März. Halbmonatsschrift für deutsche Kultur* 1 (1907): 547.

¹⁹ Hans Hyan, "Vorwort," in *Wie ich Hauptmann von Köpenick wurde* (Leipzig: Julius Püttmann, 1909), 5.

²⁰ LAB A Rep. 358, Generalstaatsanwaltschaft bei dem Landgericht Berlin, "Judgment of the 3. Strafkammer LG II," December 1, 1906.

²¹ Hans von Hentig, *Zur Psychologie der Einzeldelikte*, vol. 3, *Der Betrug* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1957), 38–39, 81, 133.

but rather is nothing but the furnishing (*Ausstattung*) of a living, not entirely realized truth with those material characteristics that are necessary in order to be recognized and appreciated by the world.”²² In Krull’s conception of lying, the difference between truth and a convincing deception is at some fundamental level fuzzy. Though a deception is necessarily untrue, it works only if it cloaks a potential truth—a truth that, though not yet in existence, could be made to assume a material reality. (In Krull’s own humorous example, the physical effort required to simulate an illness actually produces the high temperature, pounding heart, and churning stomach that then fools the doctor.)

In Voigt’s case, however, the “living, if not yet existing truth” at the heart of his scam was located not so much in his own imagination as in the lingering threat of a military coup. The fantasy of a military coup has a long history in Prussia, either as an attractive lure for military leaders hoping “to escape from their constitutional difficulties” or as a possible tactic for confronting the electoral success of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) after the lapse of Bismarck’s anti-socialist laws.²³ Although Bismarck never shied away from provoking fears of a coup d’état when it seemed politically expedient to do so, his immanent departure from office stoked such fantasies again—even as the military leaders who held them made no serious attempt to implement any plans.²⁴ For instance, on February 22, 1890, two days after the SPD scored its first impressive electoral victory following the lapse of Bismarck’s anti-socialist laws, General Alfred von Waldersee, then chief of the general staff, urged a military *Staatsstreich*, which was apparently only prevented by Bavaria’s refusal in the Bundesrat, the upper house of parliament, to support one, and the SPD’s best efforts not to provoke one.²⁵ Shortly thereafter, in 1891, the Reichstag’s defeat of General Julius Verdy du Vernois’s ambitious bill to introduce full conscription ignited once again talk of a military coup among Wilhelm II’s advisors.²⁶ Even as late as 1897, Waldersee, now an outsider consigned to commanding the Ninth Army Corps in Altona, sent Wilhelm a notorious memorandum that called for the violent suppression of the socialist movement. And even as most historians agree that a coup d’état was no longer feasible or necessary by 1900, the army nevertheless continued to plan for the possibility of a socialist uprising inside Germany with the general staff issuing a 1907 memorandum for deploying troops against “insurgent towns.”²⁷

Despite the military’s penchant for jealously guarding its secrecy, the German citizenry was all too aware of the army leadership’s desires, if not always their actual designs. For instance, the public was aghast when Wilhelm, apparently under Waldersee’s influence, swore in new recruits in Potsdam in 1890 by infamously declaring that they “would have to be prepared to fire on their fathers and brothers if he ordered them to do so.”²⁸ Furthermore, in 1910 the SPD obtained and published part of the counterinsurgency plans that General Moritz Ferdinand von Bissing, commanding general of the Seventh Army Corps, issued to his officers back on April 30, 1907.²⁹ The impression that the military was being held in reserve for a *Staatsstreich* was regularly reinforced by outbursts from the army’s conservative supporters in the Reichstag such as Elard von Oldenburg-Januschau, who in a speech on January 29, 1910, claimed that “the King of Prussia and the German Emperor must be able to say to a lieutenant at any moment: Take ten men

²² Thomas Mann, *Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1989), 39.

²³ Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 218.

²⁴ Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640–1945*, 218.

²⁵ Stig Förster, *Der doppelte Militarismus. Die deutsche Heeresrüstungspolitik zwischen Status-Quo-Sicherung und Aggression 1890–1913* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1985), 26.

²⁶ Förster, *Der doppelte Militarismus*, 34.

²⁷ Nicolas Stargardt, *The German Idea of Militarism: Radical and Socialist Critics, 1866–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 94. On the diminishing need for a coup, see Wilhelm Deist, “Die Armee in Staat und Gesellschaft, 1890–1914,” in *Das kaiserliche Deutschland*, ed. Michael Stürmer (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1970), 317–21.

²⁸ See Christopher M. Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 163.

²⁹ See Stargardt, *The German Idea of Militarism*, 94.

and shut down the Reichstag.”³⁰ With some justification, then, Maximilian Harden—Wilhelm II’s fiercest opponent in the public sphere—pointed to Voigt’s tactic of claiming he was acting on orders from the highest authority: “Everyone believed in the captain and his orders. No one doubted that the Emperor et Rex once again wielded the rod.... ‘By order of His Majesty’: this magic word opens and closes all gates in the Wilhelminian Empire of the German Nation.”³¹

Voigt’s decision to impersonate an officer of the First Foot Guards certainly reinforced the impression that he was acting on the kaiser’s orders. In selecting the uniform of a unit based in Potsdam, the fake captain gained the ability to roam Berlin and its environs without running into immediate superiors or subordinates who might uncover his masquerade. Of the many Potsdam companies, however, he likely chose the First Foot Guards for its reputation as one of the most exclusive units in the entire army, thus illustrating the classic *modus operandi* of the *Hochstapler*, whose aliases invariably corresponded to those most highly esteemed by society. Not only did “the First” recruit its officers entirely from the Prussian nobility (it did not have a single officer of bourgeois background until 1913), but, as the Prussian king’s bodyguards, its officers also enjoyed an especially close relationship with the monarch.³² Indeed, the king of Prussia was the nominal head, and it was tradition for princes in the royal family to be commissioned as lieutenants in “the First” on their tenth birthday.³³ Thus, as a captain in “the First,” Voigt made it seem credible that he was acting on the kaiser’s direct orders.

Commentaries, poems, and caricatures give little doubt that the general public saw Voigt’s uniform as the most essential prop for his hoax. The liberal *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, for instance, insisted that “The Köpenick swindle ... clearly taught: Dress up in a uniform in Prussian Germany and you are all-powerful. The uniform is the talisman that nothing can withstand.”³⁴ A comic strip in *Simplicissimus* sought to illustrate this principle. In the first few frames, a police officer, soon joined by two others, observes a suspicious-looking man entering a public restroom with a package under his arm. While the police wait outside, crouching with suspicion, the man in the restroom changes into the military uniform he had been carrying in the package. In the final frame, as he exits the restroom, the three police officers are all standing at attention—their suspicion now banished by “the holy coat [Rock] of Köpenick.”³⁵

Yet for all the emphasis that criminologists placed on the *Hochstapler*’s dress, at least one was inclined, albeit a few years before Voigt’s masquerade, to reverse the age-old paradigm: “Is the saying really true that clothes make the man? To me it seems much more the case that the person gives the clothes the relevant character.”³⁶ Indeed, by all accounts, Voigt’s impersonation of a Prussian officer was superb. Criminologists, however, were in fact quick to emphasize the crucial performative dimensions that required much more effort from a con artist than a stage actor. In his forensic manual, for instance, Richard von Krafft-Ebing noted that “while [the actor] gets his role assigned, and studies and memorizes it at his leisure, the dissembler (*Simulant*) is author and actor at the same time—and even more: he must constantly be an improvisator. He finds himself continually in action, whereby he is incessantly being watched, while the actor can leave the stage for a time

³⁰ *Stenographische Berichte*, vol. 259 (1910), 898.

³¹ Maximilian Harden, “Köpenick,” *Die Zukunft*, October 27, 1906, 135–36.

³² See, for example, Karl Demeter, *The German Officer-Corps in Society and State, 1650–1945*, trans. Angus Malcom (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), 30–32.

³³ See, for instance, Lamar Cecil, *Wilhelm II. Prince and Emperor, 1859–1900*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 26–27.

³⁴ “Die Komödie von Köpenick.”

³⁵ O. Gulbransson, “Der heilige Rock von Köpenick oder die Macht der Uniform,” *Simplicissimus* 11, no. 33 (November 12, 1906): 517 (http://www.simplicissimus.info/uploads/tx_lombkswjournaldb/1/11/11_33_517.jpg).

³⁶ Pitz, “Hochstapler,” 106.

and rest.”³⁷ In a similar vein, Hentig emphasized that the audience of the con man’s performance is also markedly more challenging than a stage actor’s: “People who want to treat themselves to an illusion go to the theater where they sit in comfortable chairs...; the resistance against the summoned and desired suggestion is small.”³⁸ In light of the challenges, it is easy to see why Krafft-Ebing, von Hentig, and other forensic specialists of the day expressed a certain admiration for the creativity and endurance of these con men.³⁹

Once in uniform, Voigt’s first step in executing his plan was requisitioning the soldiers, whose presence and weaponry offered additional material support—beyond his own uniform—for his ruse. Nevertheless, Voigt’s plan to assume absolute command over soldiers who had never set eyes on him rested on military policies, many of which Voigt, who had never served in the army, apparently knew from his childhood interactions with the men in the Dragoon regiment stationed in his hometown of Tilsit.⁴⁰ In the short autobiographical sketch he wrote for his lawyers in 1906, Voigt claimed that his familiarity with the military was such “that [he] knew the little *Waldersee* better than catechism,”⁴¹ a reference to Friedrich Gustav von Waldersee’s *Leitfaden bei der Instruction des Infanteristen*, which specified that the first duty of any soldier was obedience to superiors, broadly defined: “Counted among superiors are not just the officers and NCOs of the branch to which a soldier is assigned but rather those of the entire army.”⁴² Of course, obedience in the Prussian military was ensured by stiff penalties in the Military Criminal Code.⁴³ Complaining, questioning, or talking back to hierarchical superiors, for instance, resulted in arrest, which could be increased to imprisonment for up to three years if done in front of others.

Although military policy easily explains the soldiers’ obedience, the willingness of the police to carry out the orders of an army captain represented a gray zone of military authority. Because local and regional police personnel were required to have a minimum of six years of experience in the military, at least three of which had to be spent as noncommissioned officers, their acknowledgment of the presumed captain’s legitimacy carried some weight, even for active soldiers.⁴⁴ Moreover, in the Prussian hierarchy, the military—especially the officer corps—trumped the police force. In the case of joint action, such as against mass strikes and other perceived threats to the political order, the police and other civilian authorities were subordinated to the military, which had the right to act on its own initiative.⁴⁵ And although military personnel were obligated to obey all civil and criminal statutes as well as military laws and regulations, an 1855 cabinet order nevertheless required police officials to provide deferential treatment to officers at all times, even those suspected of committing a crime: “The officer is legitimated as an officer by the fact that he wears the officer’s uniform of the army of his majesty the king. He does not need any additional legitimation vis-à-vis the police. Accordingly, he may and must—whether he belongs to the active

³⁷ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Lehrbuch der gerichtlichen Psychopathologie, mit Berücksichtigung der Gesetzgebung von Österreich, Frankreich und Deutschland*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1900), 41.

³⁸ Hentig, *Zur Psychologie der Einzeldelikte*, 3, *Der Betrug*, 146–47.

³⁹ For instance, the head of Hamburg’s criminal police, G. A. Hopff, admitted that “actually one has to admire the deftness (*Gewandtheit*) of their appearance, the cleverness with which they adjust to all situations, and the elegance of their manners.” G. A. Hopff, “Das internationale Verbrechen und seine Bekämpfung,” in *Mitteilungen der Internationalen Kriminalistischen Vereinigung*, ed. Ernst Rosenfeld (Berlin: J. Guttentag, 1906), 219.

⁴⁰ Voigt, *Wie ich Hauptmann von Köpenick wurde*, 9–10.

⁴¹ Reproduced in Walter Bahn, *Meine Klienten: Beiträge zur modernen Inquisition*, ed. Hans Ostwald, *Großstadt-Dokumente*, vol. 42 (Berlin and Leipzig: Hermann Seeman Nachfolger, 1908), 103.

⁴² Friedrich Gustav Graf von Waldersee, *Leitfaden bei der Instruction des Infanteristen*, 30th ed. (Berlin: C. Grove, 1850), 13.

⁴³ See the sixth section, “Strafbare Handlungen gegen die Pflichten der militärischen Unterordnung,” in *Königlich Preussischen Kriegsministerium*, ed., *Kompendium über Militärrecht* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1900), 178–87.

⁴⁴ Elaine Glovka Spencer, “Police-Military Relations in Prussia, 1848–1914,” *Journal of Social History* 19, no. 2 (1985): 306.

⁴⁵ Förster, *Der doppelte Militarismus*, 93.

or inactive officers—have a right to special considerations in the interest of his station.”⁴⁶ Trained to treat military officers as worthy of special respect, the police placed themselves at Voigt’s service by helping facilitate his military takeover of the elected government that employed at least some of them.

With the soldiers and police acting on his orders, Voigt was easily able to subdue the legitimate civilian government with further actions that appeared to incontrovertibly demonstrate his authenticity. Upon arriving on the second floor, he first entered the office of the *Oberstadtssekretär* (chief municipal secretary) Max Rosenkranz, the highest civil servant in the magistracy, announcing that he was arrested and would be transported to the *Neue Wache* in Berlin. At Voigt’s trial, Rosenkranz, himself a former soldier, was adamant that the fake captain came across as the Prussian officer he presented himself to be, even if the municipal secretary admitted assuming that the entire event was either “*the idée fixe of a mentally ill person or a small military exercise.*”⁴⁷ After the district court judge, Dr. Dietz, expressed doubt that a former soldier did not suspect he was being conned, Rosenkranz insisted that “*neither in his demeanor nor in his uniform*” was anything amiss.⁴⁸ Moreover, he noted, “*the commands of the accused were entirely military. If someone did not comply with his order, he barked at him in a bracingly (stramm) military tone.*”⁴⁹ As a result, Voigt encountered little difficulty in convincing most of the other civil servants, including the city treasurer (*Stadtkassenrendant*) August von Wiltberg to comply with his requests. Though Wiltberg initially resisted Voigt’s command to close the cash accounts without first conferring with the mayor, he testified that “as I expressed further reservations, [the accused] said: in the case that I refused he would have me arrested and close the accounts himself. After that I got to work.”⁵⁰ For these men, Voigt’s realistic uniform, tone, and demeanor led them to submit to his military usurpation of civilian government.

Even more revealing was the response of the elected mayor, Dr. Georg Langerhans. In contrast to his municipal employees, Langerhans repeatedly sought additional clarification and requested on more than one occasion that Voigt show him the arrest orders. As a trained lawyer and a coeditor of the fifth edition of a reference work on Prussian law, he knew to demand some kind of written proof for his arrest—and likely knew that neither the criminal code nor the military code provided for the military arrest of a civilian or even a reserve officer who was not currently on active duty.⁵¹ Voigt’s famous rebuff—“These troops here are my authorization (*Legitimation!*)!”—encapsulated Prussian military practice in dealing with civilians.⁵² Yet imagining at one point that he was the victim of a denunciation from either within the regional government or his own military district command, Langerhans eventually revealed to Voigt his own military commission as a lieutenant in the army reserve, a fact he hoped would persuade the captain to provide the reason for his arrest. As an example of the kind of quick improvisation that would have impressed Krafft-Ebing, Voigt immediately used this information to his advantage. In addition to obtaining from Langerhans his word of honor as an officer that he would not try to flee from his arrest on the way to the *Neue Wache*, Voigt testified that he told the mayor: “See, you can rest assured that it appeared appropriate to have a captain rather than a

⁴⁶ Carl Friccius, ed., *Preussische Militair-Gesetz-Sammlung*, vol. 5, 5 vols. (Berlin: Nicolai, 1856), 374. This royal order remained a source of contention. See, for example, the Reichstag debate from March 14–19, 1898, in *Stenographische Berichte. IX. Legislaturperiode. V. Session 1897/1898*, vol. 2 (1898), 1495–637.

⁴⁷ “Der ‘Hauptmann von Köpenick’ vor Gericht,” *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, December 2, 1906, morning edition; emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ “Der ‘Hauptmann’ vor Gericht,” *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, December 2, 1906, morning edition; emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ “Der ‘Hauptmann’ vor Gericht,” *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, December 2, 1906, morning edition; emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ “Der ‘Hauptmann’ vor Gericht,” *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, December 2, 1906, morning edition.

⁵¹ Robert Zelle, Rudolf Korn, and Georg Langerhans, *Handbuch des geltenden öffentlichen und Privat-Rechts für das Gebiet des Preussischen Landrechts*, 5th expanded ed. (Berlin: Springer, 1904).

⁵² “Der Köpenicker Gaunerstreich,” *Freiburger Zeitung*, October 21, 1906.

lieutenant arrest you.”⁵³ The intended effect was not only to pacify his victim, but also to strengthen the plausibility of the situation through flattery.

Most surprising, however, was that, unlike Rosenkranz, the soldiers, and the police officials, Langerhans later acknowledged recognizing problems with Voigt’s military uniform, telling the court: “I noticed at first, however, that the accused was *not quite dressed according to regulations (vorschriftsgemäß)*,” though he claimed that he was distracted from pursuing those observations by the arrival of sealed letters that Voigt immediately began opening and putting into his coat pocket.⁵⁴ (It is worth noting that Voigt also showed the mayor the additional courtesy of sending a soldier to fetch his wife from their apartment above and permitting her to accompany her husband in the carriage transporting him to the guardhouse in Berlin, suspecting—correctly it seems—that she would both encourage her husband to acquiesce to his demands while also distracting him from seeing through the deception.) Langerhans explained that “it occurred to me that he could be *an officer placed on leave (zur Disposition)*,” who, as he told his wife at the time, was probably mentally ill.⁵⁵ In their cross-examination of the mayor, Voigt’s lawyers returned to the question of their client’s uniform, asking “if you thought that the accused was mentally ill, why didn’t you call him back to reality with the abrupt comment: If you want to arrest me, then *kindly first dress according to regulations and put on a helmet!*”—to which the mayor could only respond: “*If I had had six weeks to consider it, I would have perhaps done so!*”⁵⁶

In fact, nearly everyone in Köpenick—from the elected and unelected members of the city government to the citizenry, conscripted soldiers, and the constabulary and police—treated Voigt’s lie as a highly unusual but plausible military action.⁵⁷ Indeed, one small newspaper, published just a few towns away from Köpenick, even reported the arrest as fact in a special edition that afternoon: “Köpenick’s mayor arrested along with [the] city treasurer,” noting parenthetically: “(It must have been a serious matter that took place, for such a sensational arrest is absolutely unique. The Editors.)”⁵⁸ Thus, rather than questioning the legitimacy of what was transpiring, the paper’s staff automatically assumed that if a military officer had instructions from the emperor to arrest an elected mayor and his staff, then the crime the latter had committed must have been serious. Thus, in some ways the unprecedented nature of the situation seemed to actually increase its probability.

Ultimately, then, although Voigt’s takeover of Köpenick city hall was merely acted out for his personal gain, its success relied on realizing, for both its victims and accomplices, the *potential* truth lurking in Imperial Germany’s long history of shocking public comments, leaked military policies, and murmured rumors about an impending coup. For many left-liberal commentators, it demonstrated only too clearly that the threat of a military coup was *plausible*, if not necessarily probable. From their point of view, Voigt’s actions held up a mirror to German citizens about the very real dangers of militarism as a limit to democratic institutions and civilian freedoms. As a result, Karl Kraus called Voigt the “educator

⁵³ “Der ‘Hauptmann’ vor Gericht,” *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, December 1, 1906, evening edition.

⁵⁴ “Der ‘Hauptmann’ vor Gericht,” *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, December 2, 1906, morning edition; emphasis in original.

⁵⁵ “Der ‘Hauptmann’ vor Gericht,” *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, December 2, 1906, morning edition; emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ “Der ‘Hauptmann’ vor Gericht,” *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, December 2, 1906, morning edition; emphasis in original.

Voigt was aware that a helmet was required but was unable to find one that fit him properly, so he purchased and used an officer’s cap instead.

⁵⁷ Only after the carriages carrying the mayor, his wife, and the chief municipal secretary had departed for the Neue Wache and Voigt had himself left the scene, did any of those with authority decide to take measures to ascertain the truth. According to Winfried Löscheburg, members of the city council (*Stadtrat*), who despite Voigt’s takeover had been admitted into the building for a scheduled meeting, attempted to contact the district administrator (*Landrat*) of Teltow as well as the commandant’s headquarters in Berlin, which both initially took the request for information about the “military occupation” of Köpenick’s city hall as a practical joke and delayed responding. Löscheburg, *Ohne Glanz und Gloria*, 80.

⁵⁸ The *Niederbarnimer Zeitung* in Friedrichshagen. Quoted in “Der ‘Hauptmann’ von Köpenick,” *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, October 18, 1906, morning edition.

of his nation.”⁵⁹ Harden, meanwhile, phrased the lesson Voigt taught as a homework assignment: “Ask how such city leaders would act on the day of a military coup. And see to it whether everything else is in order in the house of your civil liberties (*im Haus Eurer Bürgerfreiheit*).”⁶⁰ For both critics, Voigt’s stunt demonstrated the extent to which the fantasy of an impending coup held sway.

The Carnavalesque of Disavowal

Yet despite the warnings about “the power of the uniform,” repeated frequently following the ordeal, the public’s reaction to the fake military seizure of Köpenick’s city hall offered anything but a straightforward acknowledgment of militarism’s pervasiveness in German society. In this section I explore why so many of Voigt’s contemporaries disavowed the force of that knowledge such that the event appeared, both literally and figuratively, as just a piece of theater rather than a political lesson. Part of the problem lay in the comic value of Voigt’s usurpation of military prerogatives, which took on carnivalesque dimensions. Based on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, the carnivalesque has been typically understood as a popular form of protest and resistance in which social hierarchies are lampooned.⁶¹ As the act of a criminal, Voigt’s fraud in fact temporarily overturned traditional hierarchies and made a mockery of both military obedience and civilian deference to those in uniform. In this case, however, the status of the carnivalesque was much more ambivalent, for the public’s merriment did little to diminish the ideological hold of militarism but in fact reinforced it in two key ways. First, the carnivalesque theatricalization of the event on stages, in jokes, and via caricatures enabled the laughing public not only to experience themselves as “free individuals,” but to believe that they were outfitted with superior knowledge about the military and its uniforms—and hence inoculated against fraudulent efforts to misappropriate its authority. Second, the power of this ideological fantasy was secured by the surplus pleasures Voigt’s stunt afforded: on the one hand, as an outlet for aggression via the public’s relentless lampooning of the fake captain’s real victims; and on the other, in the highly sexualized lionization of Voigt as a supposed object of irresistible desire for women of all kinds. As Žižek insists, “In ideology, ‘all is not ideology (that is, ideological meaning),’ but it is this very surplus [of pleasure] which is the last support of ideology.”⁶² Thus, though all ideologies make some content claims about how reality functions (or should function), they in fact exert their hold on subjects through the undercurrent of libidinal energy they channel or induce: either by promising access to enjoyment we imagine has been stolen from us or by providing a target for the pleasurable expression of aggression.

Voigt certainly derived enormous satisfaction from his hoax. In light of his long history of victimization at the hands of police and state, several dimensions of his takeover of Köpenick city hall testify to its immediate forms of symbolic compensation for him. As Hentig noted about con men in general, “Certainly the secret enjoyment of the trickster must be all the greater, ... [now that] the circles, to which he had previously looked up to from afar, are lying at his feet. One could almost be inclined to see in this rat trap (*Rattenfängerei*) a trace of revenge in the one whom fate relegated to the depths of society.”⁶³ For instance, in both his testimony and in his autobiography, Voigt gleefully reported finding Köpenick’s police inspector dozing in his chair along with the latter’s rude awakening: “Thereupon I asked him whether the good city of Köpenick is paying him to sit around here and doze? If he

⁵⁹ Karl Kraus, “Karl der Große und Wilhelm Voigt,” *Die Fackel* 8, no. 213 (1906): 2.

⁶⁰ Harden, “Köpenick,” 134–35.

⁶¹ Bakhtin discusses the carnivalesque in M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968). For useful overviews of this tricky concept, see Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 65–87; Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 93–107, 162–206.

⁶² Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 124.

⁶³ Hentig, *Zur Psychologie der Einzeldelikte*, 3, *Der Betrug*, 81–82.

would be so kind to proceed outside and see that the necessary order is maintained in the streets and no disturbance interferes with traffic.”⁶⁴ Rather than executing this task, however, the inspector sought Voigt’s permission to return home for a bath: “Since this seemed to me urgently necessary, he got his leave. And it appeared that it was in fact a big washing that he undertook, for I never laid eyes on him again.”⁶⁵ Whether these events occurred in the way they are described, the anecdote allowed Voigt to take obvious pleasure in chastising this figure of authority for dereliction of duty and deficient personal hygiene.⁶⁶ Voigt also claimed that after returning from Köpenick to Berlin, his first act was to seek out a café near the Neue Wache in order to watch the arrival of the mayor and city treasurer.⁶⁷

But such pleasures were not Voigt’s alone. Indeed, right from the start boulevard and left-liberal publications paid tribute to the carnivalesque reversal of authority in Köpenick.⁶⁸ In their summary of the event, for instance, the socialist press highlighted the political irony: “*With the help of the armed forces, under the careful protection of the gendarmes and police, and in the presence of a silently astonished crowd that numbered in the thousands, the city coffers of Köpenick, one of the largest suburbs of Berlin, was, on Tuesday, stolen and plundered according to the rules of the very finest art of swindling, all while the city head and the city treasurer were transported as trusting prisoners to the Neue Wache on Unter den Linden.*”⁶⁹ By making the actions of the military and police the first elements of the statement, the German sentence structure emphasizes the role of these pillars of order while building suspense for the surprising reversal of expectations, which arrives in the verbs—feisty ones at that—that finally appear at the end of the main clause. As this text makes clear, not only were the highest local representatives of the state Voigt’s credulous victims, but members of the armed forces and police—the institutions whose monopoly over the means of violence was supposed to ensure order in German society—were also made unwitting accomplices in the crime.

The ridiculing of police continued during the ten frantic days spent trying to identify and arrest the culprit. The investigation’s progress, or lack of it, was followed closely by the news media, which also reported on the numerous false arrests that took place throughout Germany. Part of the problem lay with the police’s official description of the perpetrator, which, as the trial judge as well as many commentators noted, seemed grotesque, even absurd: “About 50 years old, 1.75 meters tall, slender, with his head bowed forward and raised right shoulder. The face is sallow, sickly, ugly, with sunken cheeks, protruding cheekbones, deep-set eyes, a drooping grey-white mustache (previously strawberry blond), a crooked nose, somewhat bent and bow-shaped legs, his hands were narrow and white, his speech refined.”⁷⁰ Perhaps as a consequence of their own unconscious fear, the state created a monstrous figure from all the unique characteristics that various witnesses remembered. To register the grotesque figure conjured by the description, the satirical magazine *Kladderadatsch* offered its own drawing of a comically misshapen figure, complete with ill-fitting uniform, with the caption: “Description: indescribable (*Beschreibung: unbeschreiblich*).”⁷¹

⁶⁴ Voigt, *Wie ich Hauptmann von Köpenick wurde*, 109.

⁶⁵ Voigt, *Wie ich Hauptmann von Köpenick wurde*, 109.

⁶⁶ Though the police official was called as a witness at the trial, he was unable to be present, having been temporarily reassigned to the province of Posen to deal with the school strike. “Der ‘Hauptmann’ vor Gericht,” *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, December 1, 1906, evening edition.

⁶⁷ Voigt, *Wie ich Hauptmann von Köpenick wurde*, 127.

⁶⁸ See Philipp Müller, “Journalistische Vermittlung und ihre Aneignung. Die öffentlichen Verhandlungen über Wilhelm Voigt alias Hauptmann von Köpenick in Berlin 1906/08,” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 13, no. 2 (2002).

⁶⁹ “Der Staatsstreich von Köpenick oder: Ein unsterblicher Schelmenstreich,” *Volksstimme*, October 19, 1906; emphasis in original.

⁷⁰ LAB A Pr Br Rep. 030-07 Nr 1091, Personal-Akten des königlichen Polizei-Präsidium zu Berlin betreffend Wilhelm Voigt alias Hauptmann von Köpenick, “Bekanntmachung,” October 22, 1906.

⁷¹ “Steckbrief,” *Kladderadatsch* 59, no. 43 (October 28, 1906): 170 (<https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/kl1906/0636>).

But if the work of a seemingly incompetent police force was ridiculed, the public's identification with the unknown perpetrator amplified the original event's carnivalesque upending of traditional hierarchies. In contrast to conservative papers, which were incensed by the disruption of the social order and as a result exclusively referred to the culprit as the "the cashbox bandit (*der Kassenräuber*)," social democratic papers baptized the unknown "Captain von Köpenick" as "the hero of Köpenick." Liberal papers shared this sentiment, albeit with a bit of a bad conscience. For instance, the *Kölnische Zeitung* opined that "the escapade is so wildly audacious and was carried out with such unflappable (*unerschütterlichen*) calmness that, especially since it was successful, people can hardly abstain from feeling a somewhat depraved but also not entirely inexplicable sympathy with its architect (*Urheber*)." ⁷² Sympathizing with the perpetrator not only allowed German citizens to express their own political frustrations, but also provided an illicit pleasure itself.

In the carnivalesque celebration of the deed, some found it a shame that the imposter only got away with such a paltry sum. Even the conservative *Coburger Zeitung* admitted, "If one didn't always have to keep saying again and again that we are dealing with a crime, one could almost lament that his work only earned him 3559 Marks (that's how much he took). If he had honored the imperial bank (*Reichsbank*) or a private bank with a visit, who knows how much more success he would have had?" ⁷³ Even for papers loyal to the state, resisting the pull of Voigt's stunt seemed to require constant reminders that it was a crime. Nevertheless, this staid paper was captivated enough to suggest even more audacious crimes in which such a brilliant criminal might have reaped even larger rewards. And except for most conservatives, nearly everyone expressed hope that the unidentified perpetrator would elude detection and arrest. Indeed, the social democratic press was positively disappointed with the news of Voigt's arrest: "Praise be to God! say the Berlin detectives (*Kriminaler*) and wipe the sweat from their brow. We knew it, with our excellent police! say the eternally patriotic circles. What a pity, what a real pity! Say ninety-nine out of a hundred who read the news." ⁷⁴

It was not surprising, then, that after Voigt's capture the public treated him like a celebrity, though even this star treatment took on carnivalesque dimensions. Thus, before Voigt's arrest, for instance, the *Freiburger Zeitung* imagined how much better the unidentified captain would have had it in America: "If he had had the luck to live in America,... then thousands of marriage proposals would have flown his way and the richest heiresses would lay at his feet, and the regret about the paltry winnings of only 4000 Marks would perhaps find expression in a supplementary national subscription (*Nationalsubskription*) that could make him a rich man." ⁷⁵ Though the author was confident that Germany was different—"we have not come so far"—events actually proved otherwise. Following Voigt's conviction, for instance, newspapers launched fundraising actions. The liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung* raised more than 400 marks from its readers while papers in Berlin did even better, with the weekly *Die Welt am Montag* bringing in 1272 marks and the daily *BZ am Mittag* almost 2000 marks—all of which amounted to more than a full replacement of the original money he stole (and forfeited). ⁷⁶ Much was also made of the anonymous rich heiress, later identified as Gertrud Wertheim, the wife of the department store magnate, who offered Voigt a lifetime monthly "pension": 50 marks while in prison, 100 marks following his release. ⁷⁷

Because he was unmarried, the strongest expression of carnivalesque pleasures came in the repeated sexualization of the outpouring of support Voigt enjoyed while in prison—itsself a libidinal expression of the *jouissance* (surplus enjoyment) that the stunt provided the

⁷² Quoted in "Der Köpenicker Gaunerstreich," *Freiburger Zeitung*, October 21, 1906.

⁷³ "Kassenraub im Köpenicker Rathaus."

⁷⁴ "Der Hauptmann gefaßt," *Volksstimme*, October 27, 1906.

⁷⁵ "Der Köpenicker Gaunerstreich," *Freiburger Zeitung*, October 21, 1906.

⁷⁶ Löschburg, *Ohne Glanz und Gloria*, 221.

⁷⁷ Löschburg, *Ohne Glanz und Gloria*, 221.

German public. Newspapers, in fact, repeatedly focused on the presumed libidinal motivations of Voigt's female admirers. For instance, in its catalog of the convict's would-be patrons, the *Freiburger Zeitung* listed a "Swiss boarding school for girls" that sent homemade jam, a woman in Paris who sent a puppet in a captain's uniform, and the 60 marks raised in "a collection that was organized by a women's steam bath (*Frauendampfbad*)."⁷⁸ In response to such reports, *Kladderadatsch* offered a verse rendition of the "captain's" imagined note of thanks to his patroness: "If sympathy drives you once more / To think of my well-being when bathing / Then I beg you please to allow me / To fetch the donation myself!"⁷⁹ Moreover, there were so many wild rumors about offers of marriage from rich women in Germany, England, and America that Voigt felt compelled to clarify the record more than once. In an early interview while he was in pretrial custody, the *Volksstimme* reported him saying: "It is not true that I looked so splendid in my uniform that I received various proposals of marriage from rich, middle-class women."⁸⁰ Even after his release from prison in 1908, Voigt again denied such outlandish rumors: "On this occasion he characterized as nonsense the reports of newspapers that he received numerous marriage proposals from well-situated women."⁸¹ Like the treatment of the police's supposed incompetence, these rumors continued the carnivalesque reversal of traditional hierarchies, with wealthy women falling for a lower-class criminal and with women proposing marriage instead of men.⁸²

Most spectacularly, satirists also extended the carnivalesque features of the Köpenick hoax by reimagining Voigt's siege of Köpenick as a sexual transgression itself. For example, the Viennese satirical weekly *Wiener Caricaturen*, which also published separate editions in Berlin and Leipzig, offered a drawing with the title "What is still possible in Germany." The cartoon depicts an elderly man and his attractive wife kneeling submissively before a uniformed officer with a written order in his hand. The caption reads: "The captain appeared before the mayor and, on express order of the Kaiser, demanded from him that he surrender his wife for one night. Since the mayor is a reserve officer, he naturally had to comply immediately with His Majesty's orders."⁸³ Similarly, a color drawing in the satirical *Simplicissimus* imagined an attractive daughter of a mayor leaning out of the window of her father's office pondering her luck: "I'm just happy that the captain didn't ask for my hand in marriage!"⁸⁴ Both of these works seek to capture the appalling obedience of civilian officials who acquiesced so completely to the outrageous demands of an unknown military officer. Although women are the imagined objects of the captain's desires, the consequences are seen as a direct assault on the mayor's masculinity because, in both cases, his subservience to the kaiser as military authority leads him to renounce his role as male head of the household—first as a cuckold and then as a potentially irresponsible father.

As these caricatures indicate, the counterpart to the carnivalesque celebration of Voigt was the relentless ridiculing of his victims as stooges and fools. As both Bakhtin's admirers and detractors acknowledge, the concept of the carnivalesque tends to overlook the negative

⁷⁸ "Der 'Hauptmann von Köpenick,'" *Freiburger Zeitung*, December 2, 1906.

⁷⁹ "Treibt wieder mal die Sympathie / Beim Baden Sie zu meinem Wohle, / Dann bitt' ich sehr, gestatten Sie, / Daß ich die Gabe selbst mir hole!" "Der 'Hauptmann' Voigt an die Spenderinnen vom Admiralsgartenbad," *Kladderadatsch*, 1906, 673.

⁸⁰ "Respekt vor der Uniform," *Volksstimme*, October 31, 1906.

⁸¹ "Nervenkur des 'Hauptmanns von Köpenick,'" *Berliner Tageblatt*, October 2, 1908, evening edition.

⁸² Though Voigt claimed at his trial to be a widower with children in Prague, probably in an effort to convince the judge that he was a family man, he in fact exhibited a surprising lack of interest in "the fair sex." His lawyer hinted that Voigt may have had homosexual inclinations, noting that his long prison sentences involved "the deprivation of normal sexual pleasure combined with the inevitable mushrooming (*Emporwuchern*) of perverse tendencies, the least of which is the masturbation." Bahn, *Meine Klienten*, 72; emphasis in original.

⁸³ "Was in Deutschland noch möglich ist," *Wiener Caricaturen* 26, no. 43 (October 28, 1906): 1 ([https://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/annoshow?call=wcc\[19061028\]1\[33.0\]0](https://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/annoshow?call=wcc[19061028]1[33.0]0)).

⁸⁴ "Die Tochter des Bürgermeisters," *Simplicissimus* 11, no. 33 (12 November 1906): 527 (http://www.simplicissimus.info/uploads/tx_lombkswjournaldb/1/11/11_33_527.jpg).

dimensions that inhered in these popular rituals: the “many carnival and carnival-like degradations [that] clearly functioned to reinforce communal and hierarchical norms.”⁸⁵ To some extent, the abuse heaped on Köpenick officials was politically motivated on behalf of rescuing the authoritarian structures that Voigt’s fraud transgressed. For instance, in a telegraph from Berlin, the *Freiburger Zeitung* passed on a rumor about an impending investigation of Köpenick officials: “It is said that an investigation is being conducted against the Köpenick officials, especially about the extent to which certain officials may be guilty of neglecting their duties. Thus, it will be investigated whether officials could have prevented an unauthorized person from coming into possession of city funds.”⁸⁶ Though an official inquiry may have been routine in such matters, many pockets of society clearly believed that Voigt’s victims carried at least some of the responsibility for the hoax’s success—and were prepared to make them pay the price.

Because most left-liberal news organizations understood Voigt’s success as “shameful proof of a deficit of civic responsibility (*Bürgersinn*), manly courage (*Mannesmut*) and knowledge of the law (*Rechtskenntnis*),” the primary target for derision was the mayor himself because as a lawyer, reserve officer, and the elected head of civilian government, he, it was believed, should have been expected to know better.⁸⁷ As the *Freiburger Zeitung* reported, a number of other periodicals claimed that “in any case, one might have expected more deliberation and assertiveness, even if his anxious wife was wringing her hands right next to him and entreating him to acquiesce.”⁸⁸ Indeed, with unsuppressed *Schadenfreude*, the social democratic papers offered perhaps the most relentless attack, portraying Langerhans, again accompanied by his “hand-wringing wife (*Weib*),” as a grotesquely fearful mayor with “chattering teeth” and incapable of manly resistance: “‘May I ask ...’ the little mayor (*Bürgermeisterlein*) trembled.... The highest agent of civil authority, the representative of the good citizenry, caved before the bayonets of the loyal grenadiers.”⁸⁹ Like the *charivari* rituals of the carnival, which sought to publicly “degrade people who had transgressed community sexual norms,” these critiques repeatedly emphasized the presence of his wife, invariably depicted as hysterical, to portray the mayor as too influenced, even too similar, to his wife, and hence lacking in the “manly courage” the situation demanded.⁹⁰ As if the public’s scorn were not enough, Voigt apparently later joked that “the mayor’s wife proved to be the only man in the Rathaus in Köpenick.”⁹¹

The other factor contributing to the public’s one-sided reception was the immediate and persistent theatricalization of Voigt’s fraud on countless German stages. Not only did these humorous dramas extend the carnivalesque character of the original takeover, but they also enabled German citizens to distance themselves from the actual event itself. By turning Köpenick into theater, a make-believe event, theatergoers inhabited a space of knowledge located somewhere at a remove from the stage. According to Hentig, the public’s pleasure in hearing about the successful escapades of con men derived from the same sources of pleasure we get from theater: “We pay admission to enjoy this deception (*Blendwerk*), which is all the more welcome the more perfect it is. We find the same pleasure in the good performance of a con man,” he noted, but only “when others—and not ourselves—are harmed or made fools of.”⁹² Thus, the ability to laugh at these theatrical events implied a superior position of knowledge and a disidentification with Voigt’s victims. Yet as the criminologist Gustav Aschaffenburg contended, those deriving *Schadenfreude* from a con man’s victims invariably believed that they would have acted differently in the same circumstances: “And probably

⁸⁵ Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought*, 74.

⁸⁶ “Der Gaunerstreich von Köpenick,” *Freiburger Zeitung*, October 20, 1906.

⁸⁷ “Der Köpenicker Gaunerstreich,” *Freiburger Zeitung*, October 21, 1906.

⁸⁸ “Der Köpenicker Gaunerstreich,” *Freiburger Zeitung*, October 21, 1906.

⁸⁹ “Der Staatsstreich von Köpenick oder: Ein unsterblicher Schelmenstreich,” *Volksstimme*, October 19, 1906.

⁹⁰ Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought*, 74.

⁹¹ See Löschburg, *Ohne Glanz und Gloria*, 70.

⁹² Hentig, *Zur Psychologie der Einzeldelikte*, 3, *Der Betrug*, 81.

most sense that this kind of thing could not happen to them in the same way; they would have seen through it that something was amiss.”⁹³ For Aschaffenburg, who admitted openly that he, a professor and professional criminal psychologist, had been fooled by con men many times in his career, such overconfidence was merely a fantasy, one available to those who have never been the victim of a swindle—or more likely those who, “because of the skillfulness of the *Hochstapler*,” were fooled and simply never knew it.⁹⁴

This fantasy of superiority, however, is not neutral, but rather deeply ideological. As Ziemann notes, the division between those who were fooled and those who imagined themselves immune was at the heart of the reception of Köpenick, for it was [always] “the others” who were fooled “that one had to characterize as ‘militaristic.’”⁹⁵ However, because Voigt’s stunt did in fact require the militaristic mindset of his victims and accomplices, the right conclusion to draw is that there was actually no real difference between those who fell for his hoax and those who “would have figured it out,” for the latter category is just a self-deceptive fantasy. And it is a highly ideological one at that, for as Žižek contends, “The subject who maintains his distance toward the ritual is unaware of the fact that the ritual already dominates him from within.”⁹⁶ In particular, a belief in “the liberating, anti-totalitarian force of laughter, or ironic distance” is, according to Žižek (who is drawing on Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism), one of the ways that individuals bind themselves “to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them.*”⁹⁷ Thus, the real ideological moment in the reception of Voigt’s military takeover was its subsequent theatricalization, for it enabled audiences to imagine both that Voigt’s takeover was merely a piece of theater *and* that, if they had been in Köpenick that day, they would have had the necessary “objective” distance to see through Voigt’s charade.

As it turns out, though, the “objective grounding” by which people imagined they would have recognized the fraud as theater was itself already saturated with the ideology of militarism, especially the public’s vast knowledge of military uniforms, which supposedly should have allowed those in Köpenick to see that Voigt was merely an impersonator wearing a costume.⁹⁸ In criticizing the gullibility of Voigt’s victims, for instance, the press focused in particular on the problems with his uniform, such as the cockades on his cap, which were fastened in the wrong order, with the Prussian cockade on top and the national cockade on the red trim below.⁹⁹ Indeed, newspapers such as the *Berlin Lokal-Anzeiger* emphasized the discrepancy between the public expectations for a German officer and Voigt’s appearance: “Since we are ‘a people in arms’ (*Volk in Waffen*), it is no wonder that the criticism turns right away to the uniform (*Adjustierung*) of the perpetrator, on whom a military eye would have immediately taken offense.”¹⁰⁰ This report imagined that the very forces of militarism that have produced a “people in arms” could have, in turn, prevented such duplicity, for militarism had given the general public “a military eye” with an ability to distinguish

⁹³ Aschaffenburg, “Zur Psychologie des Hochstaplers,” 544.

⁹⁴ Aschaffenburg, “Zur Psychologie des Hochstaplers,” 544.

⁹⁵ Ziemann, “Der ‘Hauptmann von Köpenick,’” 258.

⁹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, “The Seven Veils of Fantasy,” in *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 6.

⁹⁷ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 28, 33; emphasis in original; Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 322.

⁹⁸ Knowledge of uniforms was inculcated at an early age. For instance, many middle-class men recalled receiving as a child army and navy outfits that were “so carefully and exquisitely executed that they can only be distinguished from real uniforms by their smaller size.” Paul Hildebrandt, *Das Spielzeug im Leben des Kindes* (Berlin: G. Söhlke, 1904), 284–85. Meanwhile, one pedagogue who grew up in a city frequented by soldiers from around the world proudly recalled that he “not only acquired a great knowledge of uniforms (*Uniformkenntnis*) but also eventually studied them in such depth that I was capable of immediately recognizing each foreign uniform.” Dr. Grävell, “Die Uniform als Erzieher,” *Pädagogisches Archiv. Monatsschrift für Erziehung und Unterricht* 46, no. 12 (1904): 788.

⁹⁹ For a good account of Voigt’s travails in collecting his uniform, see Löscheburg, *Ohne Glanz und Gloria*, 15–20.

¹⁰⁰ Reproduced in Wolfgang Heidelmeier, ed., *Der Fall Köpenick. Akten und zeitgenössische Dokumente zur Historie einer preußischen Moritat* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1968), 98.

between a real and a counterfeit officer. Such knowledge, itself a product of German militarism, was thus supposed to function as an immunization against the excesses of militarism (or its perversion by a criminal imposter).

Of course, the takeover of Köpenick should have undermined the credibility of this defense because neither the real soldiers that Voigt commandeered to facilitate his crime nor the arrested civilians, many of whom were either former soldiers or held commissions in the reserve officer corps, were able to see through Voigt's impersonation. As a result, the notion of an "objective," non-ideological stance proved—much like the numerous marriage proposals from wealthy widows—to be merely one more fantasy authorized by the German self-understanding of itself as "a people in arms." It is thus illustrative that in their first interrogation of Voigt the Berlin police officials pushed the fake captain to explain why so many were duped. According to the Magdeburger *Volksstimme*: "To the bewildering question whether it is understandable how people in Köpenick did not ask right away for his authorization, the hero of Köpenick answered as a better authority (*Kenner*) on the Prussian tradition of slavish obedience (*des preußischen Kadavergehorsams*): 'Sir, I do not know you! But if you had come with your senior government minister (*Oberregierungsrat*) and your president—do you think I would have engaged in a long discussion?'"¹⁰¹ Voigt insisted that his impersonation was simply too convincing and that they would have been defenseless, too. The *Volksstimme* noted that Voigt then proceeded to bark an order as a small demonstration of his convincing act. In Voigt's own account of the event, he claimed that "only when the gentlemen began to make fun of those in Köpenick did I explain to them dryly that the gentlemen of the police would have fared the same if it had pleased me to visit the Berlin police headquarters. And as they began to dispute this and point to their better knowledge and greater insight into these cases, I demonstrated to them in a drastic manner how they would have fared, and I believe they admitted silently that they had no reason to laugh at others."¹⁰² In both accounts, the brief theatrical reprise demonstrated that any clear distinction between theater and scam was just an ideological illusion.

Conclusion

Robert Kennedy famously wrote that "every society gets the kind of criminal it deserves."¹⁰³ This statement rings doubly true in Voigt's case. Certainly, although draconian punishments and police corruption laid the foundation for Voigt's desire for revenge, the aggressive use of police surveillance provoked an existential crisis for him in which returning to a life of crime seemed the only way out. Even the Berlin court found at his trial that Voigt "was well on his way to becoming a useful member of society" until police supervision "pushed him again into a life of crime."¹⁰⁴ Likewise, the nature of Voigt's crime—his decision to impersonate a Prussian officer, commandeer soldiers, and lead a military takeover of civilian government—also depended on Imperial Germany's social and political structure in which the army exercised power outside of civilian restraints.

But though Voigt's case brought new attention to the plight of the exconvict, it did little to weaken the ideology of militarism and may in fact have even strengthened it.¹⁰⁵ Despite the numerous diatribes against militarism in the wake of Köpenick, many Germans—that is, the ones laughing at Voigt's victims in Köpenick—came to imagine that they were otherwise immune from nefarious attempts to appropriate the power of the uniform. Thus, in the carnivalesque celebration of Voigt's actions, it was always "those others"—the fake captain's

¹⁰¹ "Der Hauptmann, der Hauptmann—gefangen!," *Volksstimme*, October 28, 1906.

¹⁰² Voigt, *Wie ich Hauptmann von Köpenick wurde*, 130.

¹⁰³ Robert F. Kennedy, *The Pursuit of Justice*, ed. Theodore J. Lowi (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 47.

¹⁰⁴ LAB A Rep. 358, Generalstaatsanwaltschaft bei dem Landgericht Berlin, "Judgment of the 3. Strafkammer LG II."

¹⁰⁵ On the case's impact on criminal justice reform, see Rosenblum, *Beyond the Prison Gates*, 113–19; Hett, "The 'Captain of Köpenick' and the Transformation of German Criminal Justice, 1891–1914."

victims or their imagined surrogates—who were the foolish militarists, never those who were laughing. This laughter, particularly when directed against Voigt’s actual victims, marked an outsized confidence that was itself deeply ideological in three ways. First, Voigt’s feat in Köpenick—his success in duping active-duty soldiers, police officers and other former soldiers, journalists, and a legal scholar—suggests that a wide range of military and civilian personnel could be persuaded to submit, stand by, or even actively participate in an illegal military usurpation of legitimate government. Second, although those involved in the Köpenickiade demonstrated the powerful ideological thrall of militarism, the popular response of the public—those who either reduced the crime to theater or imagined that their military knowledge rendered them immune to Voigt’s charade—must also be seen as thoroughly ideological for it proved impervious to the facts or used them—as in the case of the faulty uniform—to reach a different conclusion. Yet as Žižek points out, “An ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favour.”¹⁰⁶ Finally, as the sexualization of Voigt reveals, this fantasy of freedom from militarist ideology was not merely conceptual but took hold of these subjects through the undercurrent of libidinal energy it channeled. What a psychoanalytic perspective on fantasy uncovers, however, is that ideology is all the more powerful to the extent that this surplus pleasure is projected onto others and remains unrecognized by those who experience it, enabling people to act as if the explicit precepts of their worldview guide their thinking and behavior.

But if there were any lingering political lessons to be learned from Voigt’s act, the kaiser’s decision to commute his sentence effectively put an end to all that. For if Voigt had usurped the kaiser’s military authority in commandeering troops and arresting an elected head of civilian government, the kaiser’s decision to pardon the fake captain demonstrated not only his actual power, but his ability to inhabit the position of one who perceives justice even better than the law itself. Moreover, Voigt did his part to repair the traditional hierarchies by publishing an open letter to Wilhelm II full of praise and self-abasement: “Most powerful, most serene highness, most merciful Emperor, King and Sir! Majesty! The favor and mercy of Your most merciful Majesty have given me in unexpected kindness a gift that is beyond leave and comprehension ... May your Majesty permit me to continue to further view myself as the most humble servant of Your most merciful Majesty, W. Voigt.”¹⁰⁷ Despite the excessive language of the *laudatio*, which veers into parody, the sentiment seems real. There is nothing in Voigt’s biography to suggest that he ever understood his own crime as a political parody of the current system; in fact, he took every opportunity to portray himself as a loyal subject and admirer of the army—one who would have gladly served in the military if his criminal record hadn’t dashed those dreams in his youth.¹⁰⁸

After his pardon, Voigt toured widely throughout Germany and Europe as the “captain of Köpenick,” even making it so far as the United States.¹⁰⁹ In addition to his autobiography, these paid appearances, at which he also sold autographed postcards, brought him enough money to buy his own place in Luxemburg, where he retired in 1912 until his death in 1922. Though the police continued to watch him carefully and many times forbade his public appearances, the carnivalesque threat of the captain of Köpenick had by this time devolved into a mere commodity. Of course, these public appearances had never pleased political conservatives, who found this sensationalism misplaced. Thus, one of the readers of the *Allgemeine Rundschau* complained that “with all the originality that belongs to the escapade of the ‘captain,’ it must always be remembered that we are dealing with a man who has been sentenced three times to prison for burglary.”¹¹⁰ But even his most ardent fans lamented his

¹⁰⁶ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 49.

¹⁰⁷ “Voigts Dankschreiben an den Kaiser,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, August 25, 1908, evening edition.

¹⁰⁸ Voigt, *Wie ich Hauptmann von Köpenick wurde*, 16.

¹⁰⁹ “Koepernick Raider Tells of His Exploit: Voight [sic], the Cobbler, Who Posed as a Kaiser Guard and Held Up a Treasury, Is Here,” *New York Times*, April 8, 1910.

¹¹⁰ Robert Salis, “Ein anderes Hauptübel unserer Zeit,” *Allgemeine Rundschau* 5, no. 2 (September 5, 1908): 592.

unbridled penchant for commercialized self-promotion. The writer Paul Lindau, one of Voigt's biggest supporters during his trial, nostalgically lamented, "In this phase of his development, the man no longer interested me. If only he had remained the magnificent Captain of Köpenick!"¹¹¹ Lindau rather optimistically concluded that "People (*man*) will forget the meaningless aftermath and retain a vague memory that the initially shocking human tragedy reached a flat albeit conciliatory ending following its comic highpoint." This "conciliatory ending," however, was only too good at enabling many Imperial Germans to imagine that they were immune to the ideology of militarism that Voigt's stunt had laid bare.

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¹¹¹ Paul Lindau, "Der Hauptmann von Köpenick," in *Ausflüge ins Kriminalistische* (Munich: A. Langen, 1909), 272.

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