

Taking an Army from Dictatorship to Democracy

Lessons Learned by the Bundeswehr in Absorbing the East German Army

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ABSTRACT

After the reunification of Germany, the Bundeswehr had to take over the former East-German army (Nationale Volksarmee, NVA). The reduction in the numbers of military staff throughout Eastern Europe after the Cold War also made the task more difficult.

Researchers from the Bundeswehr Institute of Social Sciences interviewed East-German soldiers immediately after reunification. They found that most of them were obedient followers whose professional skills were good, but who had no initiative. The strong influence of dogmatic communist ideology was also a problem. Many former East-German officers thought that West Germany also had one book of truth that taught them the new, correct understanding of history, politics and society. The East-German army was not popular among the population. The status of an officer in society was privileged and there were many of them – similar to the Soviet army, junior officers in the East-German army served in positions that in western armies are covered by non-commissioned officers. Conscripts were almost fully at the mercy of the officers.

There were ca 42,000 officers in the NVA at the end of 1989. More than 99% of East-German officers were members of the Socialist Union Party of Germany. Approximately 10,000 political officers served in the NVA. Approximately 50,000 active servicemen, incl. 23,000 officers, were to be transferred according to the takeover plan. These servicemen were put on probation for two years, and once it was completed the 28-member Independent Committee selected those who were to be offered the opportunity to join the Bundeswehr career system.

All political officers were the first to be let go, but generals, colonels (with a couple of exceptions) and all officers over 55 years ago were also released from

duty. As for the remaining officers, everyone who was known to have cooperated with the secret services of East Germany was immediately fired. 30,000 of the 50,000 officers and non-commissioned officers transferred by the Bundeswehr soon resigned.

Introduction

From 1990–1993 the German armed forces, the Bundeswehr, faced the daunting task of absorbing the old East German armed forces (NVA – National People’s Army) and retraining and re-educating thousands of officers and NCOs who had served the East German regime and bringing them into the Bundeswehr as career soldiers. This study¹ will focus on a recent example of how the officer and NCO corps of a corrupt, brutal

¹ **Origin of the Study.** This paper is a period piece. It was written as an academic research study in early 2003 with the intent of helping the US forces then engaged in toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq by providing a model of how to deal with the Iraqi armed forces after the fall of Saddam Hussein. This research was supported by the US Army War College and at the time was intended to support the efforts of the US Army War College Iraq planning group that had in late 2002 and early 2003 published an outline plan for the occupation of Iraq (see: Conrad Crane and Andrew Terrill eds., *Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, Challenges and Missions for Military forces in a Post-Conflict Scenario*, Carlisle PA: US Army War College, Feb. 2003). The outline plan for the occupation of Iraq strongly recommended that the US military NOT disband the Iraqi army after the defeat of Saddam Hussein, but rather take over the force and remould it over time. Needless to say, as this paper was completed in the spring of 2003 the US leadership, acting against the advice of the pre-war Army planners, decided to disband the Iraqi Armed Forces that had during the war largely demobilised themselves and gone home to await events. The disbanding of the Iraqi Armed Forces was the key event that triggered the start of the insurgency in Iraq and led to eight years of American and Coalition counterinsurgency operations in that country (see: James Corum, *Fighting the War on Terror* (St. Paul: Zenith Press, 2007). In light of that strategically disastrous decision by the Bush administration, this paper shows that there were other alternatives to disbanding the Iraqi Armed Forces and that the following bloody internal conflict in Iraq might have been mitigated or largely avoided if other paths had been taken. The following text is from the study this author wrote for the US Army in 2003 and argues that the Iraqi Armed Forces might have been successfully remodelled and reformed if the Bundeswehr’s model for absorbing the East German Armed Forces had been followed. (Author’s note.)

Parts about and comparison with Iraq have been omitted for this version of the study, newly edited for publication in the Estonian Yearbook of Military History. (Editor’s note.)

and totalitarian state was vetted, retrained and re-educated to serve as the officers of a democracy. The paper explores the first steps of building a new army, that is the process of selecting the officers and NCOs from the old regime who were capable of meeting basic standards of professional competence (after additional training) for Bundeswehr service and who had the willingness to be re-educated and to serve in the armed forces of a democratic state – with all the cultural changes that such a step entailed.

Understanding the problem: getting a comprehensive picture of the former East German soldiers

In absorbing officers and NCOs of the old East German armed forces, one of the first things the Bundeswehr did was to build a picture of the mentality of the East German soldiers, their culture, their political and social understanding and their current beliefs about their future in a democratic state. The Bundeswehr possesses a first-rate institute for military sociology, the Socialwissenschaftliche Institut der Bundeswehr, and employs a group of highly qualified civilian academic experts who regularly produce studies on the demographics and social attitudes of the Bundeswehr. In late 1990, as the NVA was taken over by the Bundeswehr, the Bundeswehr's top sociologists went to work administering a wide variety of opinion polls and interviews (responder's identity was anonymous) to build up some accurate data about the background, education, worldview, etc., of the NVA officer and NCO corps. With the data provided by the Bundeswehr sociologists, the Bundeswehr commanders, Defence Ministry and Military Personnel Office had a good basis to develop personnel policies appropriate for the selection of East German officers and NCOs.

The process is described in detail in Frithjof Knabe, *Unter der Flagge des Gegners (Under the Flag of the Enemy)*.² Knabe describes the

² Frithjof Knabe, *Unter der Flagge des Gegners* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994). Due to the nature of the paper being originally a report, there are only a few footnotes, but the list of the most important literature is given in the endnotes. (Editor's note.)

methodology, the questions and the results of extensive surveys of the East Germans. As well as information describing the education and social background of the East German soldiers, the West German sociologists developed a series of questions to explore such issues as: the strength of commitment to the communist ideology, the view East Germans had of West Germans, the expectations for a reunited Germany, and the motivation for former East German officers to apply to join the Bundeswehr (devotion to the military profession, fear of unemployment, hope for a better future, etc.). Another series of questions developed the theme of how much trust the East Germans had in the German government and what their political views were. The questions were analysed in terms of rank and age as well as their education level.

To make a long story shorter, much of the data that the Bundeswehr's sociology experts developed came as a big surprise to the West German professional officers. In a generation and a half of totalitarian rule, the East Germans had become a notably different kind of German – culturally and socially very different from their West German counterparts. For most of the officers under the rank of lieutenant colonel, the East German government had long lost its credibility. However, the NVA officers also tended to have relatively low expectations from the West German government or gave it little credibility. Most of the officers had received an education that was so military in nature that they had no civilian diploma or qualifications to fall back on. Many, if not most, had applied to the Bundeswehr more out of a feeling of desperation and a desire for personal and family security than for love of the military profession. The older officers, as might be expected, had been part of the power structure and ideology of communism for so long and saw the West so strongly as the enemy, it was clear that they would not wish to have any part of the Bundeswehr. Having been raised in a communist dictatorship, there was a relatively immature understanding of democracy and politics among the officers. When asked which political party they preferred, the largest number, 11.2%, preferred the left-oriented SPD. A surprising 9.9% preferred the free market FDP. 7.4% preferred the neo-communist PDS and 6.7% populist groups (often extreme). Only 6.3% preferred the conserva-



Soldiers of two units of the National People's Army on demonstration at the Albert Zimmermann Barracks in Cottbus demanding an immediate military reform with a reduction of military service to 12 months (12 January 1990). Rainer Weisflog/Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst – Zentralbild / German Federal Archives

tive CDU and almost as many, 5.4%, would vote for the rightist–radical Republikaner Partei. 26.9% had not yet decided upon any political orientation and 17.5 % said that they had no interest in voting.³ In short, the East German soldiers were all over the map politically and demonstrated little understanding of how democratic societies function.

The senior German officers who ran the process of absorbing the East German armed forces all remarked on just how sovietised the East German armed forces had become in their mentality. One might have expected that some remnant of the traditional German military virtues

³ Knabe, *Unter der Flagge*, 165.

such as decisiveness, initiative and willingness to take authority might have survived in the East German military culture. Yet this was not so. While the East Germans were well educated and had a solid grounding in their military specialties, they were used to obeying orders to the letter, doing only what they were told and no more. It was a highly regulated and risk adverse army where authority was never questioned, where the party line was strictly adhered to and where officers could advance best if they showed no initiative or non-conformity at any time. Indeed, many West German military professionals remarked that one could spot former East German officers by these traits for years after they were absorbed into the Bundeswehr. For example, in courses taught by the Bundeswehr immediately after German reunification the East Germans out of habit would seek out the one “correct” book on a political or historical theme. They would generally try to ascertain what the “correct” party line was on any political or social issue. While their technical skills were often good, few were able of expressing any kind of critical thought – whether it was about tactics, politics, defence policy and so on.⁴

Indeed, the Bundeswehr quickly discovered that it faced a far larger cultural divide than it had anticipated. Re-education of officers and NCOs in the basics of democracy, German history, constitutional law and so on would be required for all the former East German officers and NCOs who applied for the Bundeswehr.

Noteworthy aspects of the East German armed forces

The East German armed forces were built upon the Soviet model and, as a result, had all the strengths and weaknesses of that model. The first issue was loyalty to the state – and this, in practice meant proven loyalty to the Communist Party (called the SED or Socialist Unity Party in East Germany). About 99.5% of the officer corps of the East German armed

⁴ Interview with LTC Luftwaffe ret. Michael Burkhardt 11 May 2003. Burkhardt ran courses in German history for former East German officers in the early 1990s. (Author's note.)

forces were party members. The only exceptions seem to have been some of the medical officers and staff doctors of the Army Medical Corps who were not pushed to join the SED if they were competent professionals. The officer aspirants, the officers and their families were carefully vetted to ensure that they or their immediate families were known to be solid supporters of the regime. Since many, if not most, families in East Germany had relatives in West Germany one could have cousins in the West and still serve in the armed forces – just as long as the East German officer had no regular or close contacts with them.

As party members, the officer corps was completely indoctrinated in the communist worldview. Indeed, the party ideology and education was entrusted to a large corps of 10,000 political officers who were distributed throughout the armed forces at every level and who supervised the constant program of political education for all soldiers as well as acting as the eyes and ears of the Stasi (Ministry for State Security – i.e. Secret Police). The West German officers who ran education courses for the East German officers and NCOs in 1991–1993 noted that the East Germans understood history, politics, law, social concepts, etc., almost completely through the eyes of the properly educated communist. Indeed, the whole political/social vocabulary for those educated under a communist state is different.

The East German Air Force was even more oriented towards party loyalty than the Army. In contrast to the Western air forces where the physical and mental standards required for flying the airplane play the paramount role in selecting people for pilot training, the criteria in East Germany was: 1. Politics 2. Politics 3. Politics. The East Germans were apparently afraid that their jet pilots might defect to the West so they were thoroughly vetted for loyalty to the regime. If one even had a cousin living in West Germany, this ruled out being accepted for flight training. East German pilots always flew under rigid control from the ground and were granted no opportunities whatsoever for independent flight manoeuvring.

The East German Army was an officer-heavy army – just as one finds in the Soviet model. There was a corps of professional NCOs in the East German Army, but virtually all of these were technical specialists (signals,

supply, mechanics, administration, radar operators, etc.) NCOs were expected to carry out a specialised function – but had very little authority to lead. Nor were NCOs expected to or trained to lead soldiers. This meant that in the East German officer corps junior officers performed tasks normally done by NCOs in the Western armies. In the East German army, promotion was accelerated much faster than in the Bundeswehr, but majors normally did the same jobs as captains and so on.

While there were a few officers in the East German Army who received a normal civilian education and then served as “time contract officers” (army service for 2–3 years and then to reserve status), the vast majority had gone to the officer academy and had received a purely military education and expected to serve the whole term of a 30-year career as officer on active duty.

The officer corps of the East German state were something of pampered darlings of the state. They got good housing – at least good by East German standards. They had access to special Communist Party stores and could buy little delicacies, clothes, etc., that the average East German couldn't buy. If an officer did not have a car, he and his family could at least be driven to social functions or shopping by a soldier in a military vehicle. In short, as loyal Party members they had many special privileges.

Many aspects of the East German military culture followed the totalitarian Soviet model and made for poor troop morale and further alienated the officer class from civil society. The East German Army was kept at an 85% readiness level around the clock. This meant that enlisted soldiers were not granted much leave and were confined to the military installations most of the time. Discipline was very strict on the Soviet model and the one place for initiative that the officers had was in punishing the soldiers. Enlisted soldiers had no real rights and officers were fairly free to tyrannise the troops. Enlisted men could be fined and confined to jail for a week simply on the say of the company commander. Relations between enlisted soldiers and officers were strictly regulated and anything but absolute obedience was punished.

While the special privileges and good pay for officers made the East German army a fairly attractive career, it also put the officers apart from

the average East German. The general population generally viewed the professional officers as something very separate from civilian society – as a group that belonged more to the Communist Party than the general population. In short, only a small percentage of East Germans found a military career attractive. Most of the army conscripts were called up, served their time at low pay and in barracks and facilities that would be unacceptable to any Western recruits, and left the army at the end of their service with the hope of having nothing more to do with the military for the rest of their lives. The military had a type of prestige, but in the eyes of the average person, it was not an institution that was popular or something they would recommend to their children. One might note that a large part of the West German population is either anti-military or ambivalent about service in the armed forces. This tendency was even more notable in East Germany. The army wasn't hated, but it was not liked very much.

A special command set up to absorb the East German army

After the East German dictatorship under Erich Honecker dramatically collapsed in November 1989, the East German Defence Ministry quickly reduced its forces and planned for the unification of the two Germanys. In the early stages, it was unclear as to how the East and West German armies would be merged. The date for merging the two Germanys was set for 3rd of October 1990. The West German Defence Ministry determined that the Bundeswehr would simply take over command of the East German army and work out a process of allowing thousands of the career officers and NCOs the chance to retrain and formally become regular Bundeswehr officers and NCOs. It would be a difficult process as the Bundeswehr planned to reduce the total force to 370,000 men by 1994 (from about 470,000) as part of the post Cold War force reductions.

The Bundeswehr quickly came up with a plan. On 3rd of October it would take over the 90,000 soldiers of the NVA (Nationale Volksarmee – National People's Army), which would include 23,000 officers, 27,000

NCOs and 40,000 draftee enlisted men.⁵ The NVA had already drastically reduced its force in early 1990. At the time of the Berlin Wall falling, the NVA had approximately 42,000 officers. During early 1990, the approximately 10,000 political officers of the NVA were released from service as the Bundeswehr had made clear that there was no place for the political officers of the East German regime in the Bundeswehr. Indeed, the large number of political officers indicates just how much the NVA was an instrument of the Communist Party. All officers over the age of 55 were retired and very few officers over the age of 50 were kept on. The Bundeswehr staff had made it clear from the start that it felt that officers who had served the Communist regime for decades would be unlikely to adapt to a democratic army. Indeed, thousands of East German officers asked to be released from service as they still adhered to the Communist worldview and could not bring themselves to serve in democratic armed forces. Thousands more NVA officers also resigned from the military in the hope that they could make it in the capitalist world as managers, technicians and businessmen. There was considerable hope that a reunited and capitalist Germany would provide great opportunities to bright and ambitious men and some today say that it was the best educated and brightest younger officers who got out and moved into the civilian sector and it was the less educated officers with few marketable civilian skills and with less ambition who remained and applied to serve in the Bundeswehr. There are no studies of what happened to the old NVA officer corps available but many Bundeswehr officers suspect that there's some truth to the idea that the best men did not join the Bundeswehr. There are many successful individual examples of former NVA officers that did make it in the business world. One group of NVA doctors left the service together and opened up a private medical practice in the Eastern suburbs of Berlin. They're quite rich now.

On the day of unification the Bundeswehr established a special joint command, Territorial Command East. It was headed by two highly expe-

⁵ The following information comes from the Draft Plan of Territorial Command East in the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg im Breisgau, January–March 1991. The information throughout the article comes from that document.

National People's Army soldiers in Bad Salzungen (in former East German motorised infantry barracks) receive new uniforms "Made by Bundeswehr", but they are allowed to start wearing them only from October 3rd onwards (20th of September 1990). Ralph Hirschberger/ Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst – Zentralbild/German Federal Archives



rienced senior officers, commanded by General Joerg Schoenbohm with Lt. General Werner von Scheven as chief of staff. The Territorial Command East was a new kind of command for the Bundeswehr.⁶ It included approximately 90,000 officers, NCOs and soldiers of the East German army who would remain as part of this special command for two years as the Bundeswehr sorted them all out. All of the senior command positions were taken over by officers from the West, mostly men carefully chosen for success in command and staff positions. 821 officers and NCOs were brought in from the West to fill major command and staff positions. On the day the East German Army was dissolved, 100 Bundeswehr officers

⁶ All the following material on Territorial Command East comes from an interview by the author with Lt. Gen. Werner von Scheven, ret., April 2003.

and NCOs organised into training teams arrived in the East to supervise the training of junior military leaders (company officers, platoon leaders and squad leaders) in the Bundeswehr system. Of the 51,000 civilian employees of the East German Defence Ministry, 48,300 were taken on under short-term contracts mostly to provide basic services and to serve in the dismantling of most of East Germany's formidable military infrastructure. It was helpful to have some experienced civilian administrators but several hundred West German defense civilians were brought in to serve in leadership roles.⁷

The Territorial Command East had the unusual job of carrying on standard military duties and training to include accepting and training draftees from East Germany in the training centres and conducting normal military training and exercises. The job also included closing down much of the East German military infrastructure, securing thousands of Soviet-type tanks, guns, APCs, etc., that were superfluous to the Bundeswehr's needs. An additional task was retraining all 90,000 of the East German soldiers in the culture and laws of a democratic system. At the same time, the Bundeswehr had to carefully examine the officers and NCOs who wished to remain as career soldiers in the Bundeswehr and select those best suited for retention.

The Bundeswehr decided to put all the former East German career officers and NCOs into a special conscription category. Those who wished could sign a two-year contract to serve in the Bundeswehr and at the end of that period the Bundeswehr would determine who would be offered permanent career status. Essentially, the whole officer and NCO corps of the NVA were placed on probationary status. Immediately after the Bundeswehr took over, the former NVA officers and NCOs who had remained had a three-month period to apply for the two-year contract. If they did not apply, they would be released from service – albeit with unemployment benefits, a job training program and so on. Several

⁷ An excellent overview of the handling of personnel issues in absorbing the East German armed forces is found in Edgar Trost, "Probleme der Personalauswahl," – *Ein Staat – Eine Armee: von der NVA zu Bundeswehr*, Hrsg. Dieter Farwick (Frankfurt am Main: Report Verlag, 1992), 170–205.

thousand more officers and NCOs decided not to go through with the application process – especially as it became known that long service as an informer for the Stasi (Ministry for State Security) would ensure the applicant's rejection. In any case, the Bundeswehr decided on a firm two-year transition period. At the end of 1992 the former NVA personnel would be fully absorbed into the Bundeswehr or become civilians and the Territorial Command East would be abolished.

When Territorial Command East was set up, the Bundeswehr decided that it would not consider keeping any former East German generals on active duty. Despite lobbying pressure by the East German politicians, no colonels were to be kept on duty or considered for transition to career status in the Bundeswehr. The only exception to the rule was military doctors of the NVA. However, 5–6 generals of the old regime were hired on short-term contracts as civilians to serve as advisors to the new command as well as some former colonels who worked as civilian specialists for a short period to assist with tasks such as cataloguing the munitions and material of the NVA that were now Bundeswehr property. In the same manner many staff officers of the NVA served in staff functions for Territorial Command East. The Bundeswehr was adamant on the point that the older officers were so deeply indoctrinated in the communist system and were probably so morally compromised by their long service in the East German dictatorship, that they would not be acceptable members of a democratic army. The Bundeswehr decided that the younger officers and NCOs offered the best hope to be retrained and re-educated to serve in a democratic armed forces. Many officers and NCOs with relatively high rank and who wished to continue in the Bundeswehr were demoted one or two ranks. Promotion had been accelerated in the NVA and this would bring the officers and senior NCOs more into line with the Bundeswehr rank, responsibility and promotions system.

Selecting an officer and NCO corps – the application process

The application process started with the normal Bundeswehr application questionnaire that reads much like an application for US Army enlistment. It includes personal data, medical data, educational data, and a preference list for the branch of the military and occupational specialty desired and so on. Like the US enlistment applications, there are also questions about any arrest and conviction records as well as membership in subversive organisations.

All former East German soldiers also had to fill out a special appendix questionnaire detailing their record of Communist Party membership and activity in Party-linked or controlled organisations. They also had to account for contacts and membership in communist organisations for members of their household and family. Most importantly, they had to describe in detail their contacts and relationship with the Secret Police (Stasi) and whether they had agreed verbally or in writing to become a regular informer for the Secret Police. This was especially important because the East German Secret Police kept 100,000 East Germans from all walks of life (teachers, government officials, soldiers, tradesmen, etc.) on a secret payroll to regularly and secretly inform on their neighbours, bosses and subordinates. Indeed, this was part of the pervasive repression of East German communism. When taking the figure of 100,000 secret informers spread through a population of about 18 million, one can understand the totalitarian nature of the state.

Virtually all East Germans, especially those in the armed forces, had to play along with the communist regime. Party membership and activity was unavoidable. However, service as a Stasi informer or too close links to the internal and external intelligence services of East Germany disqualified applicants from enlisting in the Bundeswehr. All of the former East Germans who applied to join the Bundeswehr had their detailed and signed questionnaires carefully checked against the records of the Stasi and of the Communist Party and its organisations by the Bundeswehr Personnel office and the Bundeswehr Counterintelligence

Corps. If the applicant clearly lied about his relationship with the Communist Party and its security organs, his application was immediately rejected.

Even if the application was accepted and the former East German soldier entered service on a short-term contract his application and background information was constantly reviewed and checked against the vast database of Communist Party and Stasi documents. If, at a later time, the former East German soldier was found to have lied in his application, he was immediately removed from the military for cause, usually within three days. In any case, several hundred of the more than 11,000 officers who signed short service contracts and joined the Bundeswehr were summarily removed when information later surfaced concerning their relationship to the Communist party and State Security. There were also many cases where the Bundeswehr Counterintelligence Corps could not prove that the applicant had lied, but still recommended removal from the service on the judgment of the Counterintelligence officials that a soldier was still committed to the Communist worldview and had been more involved with the Communist Party than his special application questionnaire had indicated. There were several dozen cases of this nature, perhaps over 100. I know of no cases in which the Independent Committee or the Bundeswehr Personnel Office overrode the judgment of the Counterintelligence Corps and tried to retain an officer or NCO after a negative judgment. The rule was apparently that if the officer or NCO's commitment to democracy was doubtful or that his involvement in the old Communist regime had been too extensive or enthusiastic, he would be removed from the service. Period. The Bundeswehr was more than ready to remove qualified and technically competent officers and NCOs simply on the belief that these men could not fit into armed forces with Western ethics and a democratic ethos.

Part of the application process consisted of a long interview with Bundeswehr officers and officials, often lasting 1–1.5 hours. The applicant's background and motivations and views were examined in detail. These interviews were usually taped and transcripts made for the use of the Personnel Office of Territorial Command East and of the Indepen-

dent Committee that had the final say on accepting officers into the regular career track of the Bundeswehr.

The application process, beyond the special background checks, also included examinations, checking educational background, a medical exam and so on. Many who applied for the two-year contract were not approved due to a weak education, poor exam scores or medical problems. A few thousand of those who applied were quickly weeded out and released from military service.

Of the 50,000 officers and NCOs taken into the Bundeswehr in October 1990, 30,000 were soon released per their own wish. Of the 23,000 officers, 11,700 opted to sign the two-year contract with the Bundeswehr in early 1991. 12,300 of the 27,000 East German NCOs signed contracts and only 1,000 of the 40,000 lower enlisted men opted for the two-year contract. Of the applicants, 6,000 officers were approved for the two-year contract, 11,200 NCOs were approved and 800 lower enlisted.⁸

A timeline was set up for absorbing, reorganising and dissolving the old NVA forces and the integration of selected personnel into the Bundeswehr. In 1991, former NVA soldiers of all ranks were allowed a three-month window (1st of October to the 31st of December) to move beyond their two-year contracts and apply for career status in the Bundeswehr or to serve another period of contract service. The Bundeswehr personnel office promised that a clear decision would be made on each application by the 31st of August 1992. Between November 1992 and June 1993 the officers who had signed two-year contracts with the Bundeswehr would be released and those accepted brought into full career status. In 1993 Territorial Command East would complete its mission and shut down. The timeline plan allowed for a systematic reorganisation of the Bundeswehr and enough time to properly assess all of the personnel applications and proved to be quite successful.

⁸ For statistical details of the NVA see: *Das Ende der NVA und die deutsche Einheit. Zeitzeugenberichte und Dokumente*. 2. Aufl., Hrsg. Hans Ehlert (Hamburg: Christopher Links Verlag, 2002).

Re-educating an army

One of the first steps of the Bundeswehr in taking over the former East German soldiers was to send 2,000 officers and NCOs to special eight week courses in West Germany where they were taught German history, political science from a democratic perspective, the German constitution, military law and tradition, and a large dose of the *Innere Fuehrung* (Inner Leadership) curriculum that has been part of the Bundeswehr training and tradition since the Bundeswehr was established in 1955. The concept of Inner Leadership is essentially a Western-style political education program for the military that emphasises the place of the military in serving a democratic state, the rights that all soldiers have in a democracy, the role of an officer and NCO in a democratic and civilian-run armed forces, the proper values that an officer and NCO and common soldier need to personalise in their daily lives as soldiers and servants of the state. Through the whole two-year absorption process, former East German soldiers were sent to special courses set up in West Germany.

The urgent requirement of the Bundeswehr was not simply to educate the former East German soldiers in the laws, regulations and mores of the Bundeswehr but also to begin to change their entire mind-set and to positively accept democracy and democratic values. The Bundeswehr ensured that experienced, well-qualified and well-educated officers and NCOs ran the courses. Usually the officers who taught the East Germans had completed the General Staff course and had a civilian liberal arts education as well as experience in teaching. Officers who were active in the special courses for the East Germans in 1991–93 remarked that it was very difficult at first for the thoroughly indoctrinated East Germans to grasp the concept of openly discussing issues or critically reading texts or even asking a superior questions or disagreeing with the teacher on any point. Typically, the sharpest of the East German officers would ask the course teachers for the one “proper” book on a subject – one that explained the party line and which the officer could be expected to memorise and regurgitate to pass the course or win approval. This was the pervasive mentality in East Germany; one found the correct party line as

quickly as possible and followed it. It has been quite a chore to re-educate East Germans to think critically or question their superiors in the last decade. One German military historian commented that the East German military historians now working with the Bundeswehr were highly educated under the old regime and had a mastery of the basics of the historian's craft. However, the East Germans still are notably lacking in critical skills such as the ability to criticise historical works or to compare several books against each other.

On the purely military side, the job of training soldiers in military skills appears not to have been difficult. The East German officers and NCOs were well educated and trained in the technical skills of soldiering. What the former East German officers and NCOs lacked was initiative. They were used to a strict system and following orders to the letter. Mission-type orders common to Western armies ("Complete such and such task with available resources by such and such time") which leave the planning and execution of the order in the hands of the commander or even senior NCO were not part of the professional mind-set of the East German officers and NCOs. They were used to being told not just what to do but exactly how to do it. Again, the West German training teams and unit commanders assigned to Territorial Command East had to work hard to instil a completely different ethos into the former East German soldiers.

Evaluating the East Germans

Highly experienced Bundeswehr officers and NCOs were assigned to almost all of the senior leadership positions in Territorial Command East. Division, Brigade and battalion commander positions and command of other large units of the existing East German Army force were taken over by Bundeswehr officers. Many of the critical staff positions down to battalion level were filled by West Germans and some officers and NCOs even assigned down to the company level although the usual apportionment was for a few career Bundeswehr officers and NCOs to be found at the battalion level. The Troop Command East was largely staffed with

career Bundeswehr officers and NCOs but many staff officers of the NVA remained. In addition, thousands of civilian employees of the old East German Defence Ministry remained to staff and support Bundeswehr operations in the East. Civilian employees of the Bundeswehr were also employed, like the officers and NCOs of the East German regime, were also employed on short-term contracts.

It was made clear from the start that all the East German officers and NCOs who had applied for career soldier status in the Bundeswehr were on a probationary status for two years. Territorial Command East was not interested in performance reports, decorations, etc., from the NVA. Over the next two years, what would matter was performance in the courses and exams administered by the Bundeswehr and the officer and NCO efficiency reports written by the career Bundeswehr officers who had been placed in all the primary command and staff positions in the East. While former East German officers remained in command at the platoon and company level, their competence and performance would be critically judged by the career Bundeswehr soldiers. In addition, their attitude towards the democratic ethos of the Bundeswehr and their ability to adapt to the new system was carefully observed. At the final stage of the process of absorbing the old East German Army, the officer and NCO evaluation reports played a central role in the final selection process of the Independent Committee.

As the Bundeswehr planned a considerable downsizing, thousands of civilian employees of the NVA would have to be cut. There was a similar evaluation process for the civilian employees as for the East German officers and NCOs. Those who had worked with the Stasi or had been too closely associated with the Communist Party organisations and ethos were removed quickly. Those who wished to stay and become permanent civilian employees of the Bundeswehr also had to undergo a thorough weeding out process.

Lessons in leadership – building trust

Many of the East German soldiers feared that the Bundeswehr would come in and act as an “occupation army” in their treatment of those who wished to continue a military career. One of the primary tasks of General Schoenboehm and General von Scheven was to allay such fears and to build a relationship of trust with the East German soldiers. In the treatment of soldiers under two-year contracts who were applying for Bundeswehr career status the slogan was “Everyone receives a fair chance”. This meant that each application would be treated fairly, that each applicant would receive careful consideration in regards to his previous career and educational attainments, that selection in the Bundeswehr would be based solely upon merit and performance and that each applicant would be given the chance to show that he could make the grade as well as any other Bundeswehr officer.

For the officers and NCOs of the old East German armed forces who asked to be released from service, there was a program of unemployment stipends and paid tuition to a variety of job courses to allow those officers a good chance to make their way in civilian life. For the officers and NCOs who applied and who were not taken into the Bundeswehr, these programs were also available. The German government made sure that there was not a class of embittered and unemployed former East German soldiers who had been simply thrown out on the street. Such a thing would have been bad politics and bad for the reputation of the Bundeswehr. General Schoenboehm spent much of his time speaking to East and West German businessmen setting up shop in the former East Germany and encouraging them to hire former NVA officers and NCOs.

General Schoenboehm wrote an excellent account of his duty as commander of Troop Command East that could serve as a useful guide to any officer who would have to deal with dissolving the army of a dictatorship and building a new democratic army in its place.⁹ General Schoenboehm and General von Scheven were constantly on the road to visit the East

⁹ See: Joerg Schoenboehm, *Zwei Armeen und ein Vaterland: Das Ende der Nationalen Volksarmee* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1992).



Military vehicles Volkswagen Type 183, commonly known as Iltis – a donation to the Estonian Defence Forces by the German Bundeswehr – have arrived in Muuga Harbour (1997). Boriss Mäemets/Estonian Defence Forces

German units, talk to the soldiers and to win their confidence. A large part of their job was to teach the East German officers and NCOs how to treat soldiers with fairness and dignity. The idea of a General visiting a unit informally and sitting and talking to troops and taking questions and answering questions was completely new to the East German military culture. Under the old regime, there was no informal contact. No one asked general questions or made any criticism or allowed anything beyond the view that everything was completely in order. The Bundeswehr officers and NCOs who came to staff Troop Command East were to set an example of scrupulous fairness and honesty in their treatment of their soldiers and worked to train the East German officers and NCOs to treat soldiers with the respect that is normal for Western armies.

Schoenboehm devotes a long chapter of his book describing his daily activities and impressions in detail. For example, the East German draftees were often very badly trained in carrying out basic military duties.

There were several instances of East German troops on guard duty who shot themselves or the comrades while apparently playing with their firearms. Basic guard procedures and firearms safety training had not been part of the East German military culture. In another instance, East German soldiers on guard duty were confronted with a loud protest demonstration outside a military installation. They had no idea how to handle the situation – the concept of a political protest was somewhat unthinkable while East Germany was a “workers’ paradise”. The Western concept of handling situations firmly and with the minimum required force was also unknown to the East German culture. In areas such as these, the commander of Troop Command East had to order more training in the basics for the East German soldiers.

The Independent Committee – final personnel decisions

In early 1992, the German government set up a committee of 28 members to review the records of all the officers and NCOs who applied for career status in the Bundeswehr. The Independent Committee was headed by a chairman and two deputy chairmen. It contained 11 senior retired civil servants, 7 retired military officers and NCOs, 4 academics, 3 current members of the German legislature, 2 current senior civil servants and 2 other civilian members. The committee had full access to all the documents and records of the former East German personnel to include the files from the Ministry for State Security, files of the Communist Party, recent efficiency reports, training reports, exam results, interview transcripts, application forms and so on. They also could request the military Counterintelligence Branch to search out additional information and provide reports on applicants.

The Independent Committee was organised into subcommittees of five members. For an applicant to be accepted into the Bundeswehr on long-term or career status, the unanimous approval of all five sub-committee members was required. The Independent Committee began work

in March 1992 and completed its work of evaluating thousands of officer and NCO applicants by early 1993. The criteria the Independent Committee used for acceptance into Bundeswehr career status was: applicant credibility and trustworthiness, the ability of the applicant to adapt to a democratic armed force, proper NCO and officer competence, and the ability to understand the past and to overcome it.

Members of the Independent Committee were carefully chosen by the German Defence Minister and the Military Committee of the German parliament. It was overwhelmingly composed of retired experts with knowledge of and credibility with the military. It was decided that the majority of the Independent Committee members would be outside the ranks of active politicians and those currently holding high positions in the government to ensure that the committee would be well-insulated from political party pressures and outside influences. Although there were some current politicians and senior civil servants on the committee, they were greatly outnumbered by the non-political members. The appointment of the committee was carefully made to ensure that each applicant for NCO and officer status would be considered fairly and objectively and would not enter the Bundeswehr on the basis of purely political considerations.

By all accounts, the Independent Committee was a great success in that it got the job done efficiently and gave each applicant the kind of fair and objective treatment that the armed forces of a democracy requires. The Independent Committee started and finished its work with a high level of credibility and met the Bundeswehr's policy that "each applicant was to have a fair chance".

Summary of the transformation of the East German forces into the Bundeswehr

The Bundeswehr in 1991–1993 provides a useful model for the armed forces of a democratic state to take over the armed forces of a totalitarian dictatorship and retrain those personnel in the culture of democracy. It was an exceptionally tough task as the influence of a generation and a

half of Communist rule had deeply affected the culture and psyche of the East Germans, particularly the military personnel who had been servants of the state. The German model provides a useful example of vetting the military personnel of a dictatorship and selecting suitable NCOs and officers for continued service in the armed forces of a democratic nation.

The Bundeswehr program was largely successful by most accounts. In a little over two years the Bundeswehr carefully weeded out officer and NCO applicants who were too closely connected with the Communist Party and its ideology. The Bundeswehr also weeded out those who simply could not adapt to a democratic system or those who lacked the education and basic skills to become effective career officers and NCOs. Those remaining spent extensive time being retrained in the principles of civilian control, learning German history from a non-communist viewpoint, learning how democracy and democratic constitutions work as well as learning the tactical and operational methods of the Bundeswehr. Most importantly, the officers and NCOs from the old East German regime learned how to properly serve as military leaders of a free and democratic state.

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