

H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Christian Th. Müller. *_Tausend Tage bei der "Asche": Unteroffiziere in der NVA_*. Militärgeschichte der DDR, Band 6. Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2003. xiv + 429 pp. Illustrations, charts, notes, bibliography, index. EUR 24.90 (cloth), ISBN 3-86153-297-2.

Hans Ehlert und Arnim Wagner, Hrsg. *_Genoße General! Die Militärelite der DDR in biografischen Skizzen_*. Militärgeschichte der DDR, Band 7. Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2003. viii + 632 pp. Illustrations, charts, timeline, notes, bibliography, index. EUR 29.90 (cloth), ISBN 3-86153-312-X.

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Recent Works in East German Military History

Since 2001, Christoph Links Verlag in Berlin has published the work of German scholars, most affiliated with the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (MGFA), in a series entitled "Militärgeschichte der DDR." Together, these volumes (now numbering eight), represent a major contribution to the true scholarly foundations of East German military history based on solid archival research. Volumes 6 and 7 of that series, under consideration here, reflect the youthful energy of the field.

The volume of biographical sketches (volume 7) makes available basic information about the military elite of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) that was often difficult to obtain in the Cold War era. What material the GDR made available was so consciously manipulated as to be useful only in very limited circumstances. By carefully combing the records of the Ministry for State Security (Stasi or MfS) and army personnel records, and combining them with interviews of the protagonists, their family members, and associates, the contributors to this volume perform a useful service. Each essay concludes with a brief discussion of the source material available for each individual. Especially welcome are the short biographies of Heinz Hoffman, Vincenz Müller, Heinz Kessler, and Theodor Hoffman. Heinz Hoffman in particular is treated to a dense examination--the longest in the volume at thirty-seven pages.

The editors quite correctly organize the volume around three "generations" of "Garrisoned People's Police" (KVP)/ National People's Army (NVA) officers: those who served as officers in the Wehrmacht before joining the East German armed forces, those "old communists" with little or no military experience who served alongside the former Wehrmacht officers in the "founding generation," and those functionaries who shepherded the NVA through the '60s, '70s, and experienced the crisis years of the late 1980s. Each generation faced particular issues that are reflected in the sketches. Nineteen men, all generals or admirals, from the army, navy, and air force, comprise the sample.

For the former Wehrmacht officers, each biography seeks to illuminate the reasons for the officer's "conversion" from "fascist" to "anti-fascist." For most, the experience of Stalingrad shook their faith in Hitler so profoundly that cooperation with the Soviets (usually first in the League of German Officers [BdO] and the National Committee for a Free Germany [NKFD]) seemed the only viable option to save their homeland. Most also remained suspect in the eyes of their comrades because of their previous service in Hitler's army. The MfS kept close tabs on their activities and possible connections with the "imperialist" West. Even those officers who themselves spied for the Stasi were the subjects of intensive investigations.

For the foundational generation, many of whom lacked both military and leadership experience, the defining characteristic was party-loyalty. Theirs was a dedication born in street-fighting during the Weimar era, exile in the Soviet Union, or the battle against fascism in Spain. These often unimaginative "party soldiers" carried out the directives of the Central Committee and their Soviet sponsors with diligence and efficiency and were rewarded accordingly. Several contributors remark on their subjects' striking absence from meaningful discussions of policy alternatives.

"Aufbaugeneration" (builder-generation) is perhaps not an appropriate designation for the third generation of officers, many of whom witness the rapid collapse of the East German regime and its army in 1989-90. Readers will recognize many of the villains of the Wende in this subset of eight biographies, including those who shared responsibility for the deadly security measures along the border between East and West Germany. Fritz Streletz, sentenced to five and a half years in prison, has become an apologist for the East German dictatorship. Some of the generals are treated more sympathetically, including Theodor Hoffmann, whose sensible oversight of the East German armed forces as they disintegrated may have prevented chaos and bloodshed.

The biographies of both the "founders" and the "builders" indicate the extreme social mobility possible in the East German state structure. Many of those who rose to the highest ranks within the National People's Army and the associated ministries came from very modest (in some cases downright impoverished) families. Remarkable also is the very long tenure in office of many of the officers of these two generations. Several served for decades in their posts, reflecting a certain ossification in the power structures of the GDR.

A brief introductory essay by the editors helps to highlight many of these generational similarities, but because each sketch is self-contained, the reader is forced to draw these common threads throughout the volume. The stylistic variety inherent in contributions from nineteen different authors helps to pave the reader's way through the weighty tome. Since one of the strengths of this work is as a basic reference, and since the tables of contents of such collections only rarely appear in searchable indexes and databases, I include in a footnote a list of the names of those treated to biographies.[1]

Christian Müller's volume delivers something only slightly less than the history of the non-commissioned officer corps promised by his subtitle. Rather, the author concentrates on the period from the late 1970s to the end of the GDR and focuses primarily on the Unteroffiziere auf Zeit (UaZ), those soldiers who obligated themselves for a three-year term of service as a non-commissioned officer in exchange for additional training, higher wages, and, most importantly, privileged access to educational opportunities upon completion of their service. Müller chooses this group because of the essentially voluntary nature of these soldiers' longer service commitment allows him to examine the factors motivating young men to serve the East German state. Müller himself served as a UaZ from 1988 to 1990 (p. 1).

Müller's book derives from his dissertation at the Universität Potsdam, completed in 2000. The published version still reads, for better and for worse, distinctly like a German dissertation; it is long, dense, and replete with chapter headings, sub-headings, and sub-sub headings; Müller takes great pains to establish the theoretical legitimacy of his investigation by sprinkling throughout the work references to the Annales school, military history "from below" (Wolfram Wette), the "total institution" (Erving Goffman), or other established methodologies. Still,

underneath the mountain of evidence and behind the jargon lie meaningful insights into a neglected subject, the non-commissioned officer corps.

Müller systematically and sympathetically examines the daily life of UaZ. Relying heavily on interviews with former non-commissioned officers, he examines the reasons for joining the ranks of the "Asche," their training for their role in molding conscripts, and their relations among each other, with conscripts, and with superior officers. Müller uses well the existing historiography on socialization, education, and military history in the DDR to contextualize the interviews and archival evidence he musters. Since the field is still underdeveloped, Mueller's spadework is appreciated.

One of Müller's particular concerns is to illuminate the process of socialization that occurred within the NVA. Müller selects the UaZ as his lens through which to view this process because they occupied an uncomfortable middle position in the military hierarchy. They were subject to the orders and discipline of the military careerists at the same time that they were the primary agents for the socialization of the much larger group of conscripts. UaZ struggled, usually with inadequate training, to accomplish the many demands of their positions and to establish their own authority in the units they were assigned to lead.

Müller finds that most UaZ committed to longer terms of service with the understanding that the East German state would reward them later with privileged access to education, career training, or other perks. Military service did not, as the GDR leadership clearly hoped, make good socialists out of the recruits. The terrible conditions of service made most UaZ keenly aware of the disparity between the promise and the praxis of "real existing socialism." Müller interviewed dozens of former non-commissioned officers and found most of them with little firm loyalty to the GDR, despite some of the problems they have experienced adjusting to life in a unified Germany.

While the ambivalence of most former soldiers toward the stated ideals of socialism disappointed the leaders of the GDR, the commitment of hundreds of thousands of men to the longer terms of service, such as UaZ, did represent a tacit acceptance of the legitimacy of the state. And despite the failure of the state's overt efforts to indoctrinate both soldiers and non-commissioned officers, military service created, according to Müller, a gradually more militarized East German society, since it ingrained certain military habits of thought and behavior in young men (p. 369).

Both works under consideration here are profoundly shaped by the nature of the historiography on Soviet-dominated Europe over the past several decades. Both works often couch their arguments in terms of what we guessed about the Warsaw Pact military in the absence of much documentary evidence. They present their evidence as either substantiating or refuting various interpretations that have been offered in the past. Müller in particular takes pains at various points to compare the NVA with the Bundeswehr or to test the applicability of sociological theories mainly developed in the West to the military institutions of the East.

Both works suffer (if only slightly) from the fact that Soviet archives on the subject of Warsaw Pact armies are still not available. To the extent that so much of East German policy was determined in/influenced by Moscow, future research in those archives will need to correct errors and fill in gaps that remain in our knowledge. Until that time, at least, these works (and the others in the series) will remain indispensable for students of German military history.

Note

[1]. Former Wehrmacht Officers: Rudolf Bamler, Bernhard Bechler, Arno von Lenski, Vincenz Müller, Heinz Bernhard Zorn. Altkommunisten: Friedrich Dickel, Rudolf Doelling, Heinz Hoffmann, Willi Stoph, Waldemar Verner, Kurt Wagner. Aufbaugeneration: Wilhelm Ehm, Theodor Hoffmann, Heinz Kessler, Erich Peter, Fritz Peter, Wolfgang Reinhold, Horst Stechbarth, Fritz Steletz.

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