

“Army of Unity” (2000)

Abstract

There was no model for integrating members of the former East German National People’s Army [*Nationale Volksarmee*, NVA] into the Bundeswehr. The process had to be improvised, and mutual resentments had to be overcome. Former officers and non-commissioned officers of the NVA were put through a lengthy selection process; about one quarter of the officers and a little more than half of the non-commissioned officers were absorbed into the Bundeswehr.

Source

Soldiers in a German Army

The 2,000 officers and non-commissioned officers from the Western federal states who, after only a brief preparation for their mission, went into the disbanded units of the NVA [National People’s Army] on October 3, 1990, were faced with tasks that were difficult to size up and delimit. They had to ensure the transfer of the command authority of the Minister of Defense, disband NVA units in terms of personnel and materials, and begin the buildup of the Bundeswehr “in the East.”

Since there were no “contingency plans” in the event of a unification of the two German states, a great deal had to be improvised. For no regulation was applicable by simply “flipping” it from West to East. Here it was necessary to come up with exceptional, transitional, and stopgap solutions and to make quick and nonbureaucratic decisions.

In addition, mastering the situation required firm and consistent leadership, on the one hand, and the delegation of responsibility, a capacity for empathy, and intuition and sensitivity, on the other. Meanwhile, members of the former NVA were exposed to immense psychological and social pressure. Many NVA soldiers and their families were extremely ambivalent about donning the uniform of the onetime state-propagated “class enemy,” even though the commander of the Bundeswehr Command East, Lieutenant-General Jörg Schönbohm, had outlined the spirit of the command takeover by Bundeswehr officers in apposite words: “We come not as victors to the vanquished, but as Germans to Germans.”

The soldiers from the new and the old federal states were called upon to carry out the “inner unification” of Germany in the military realm. Of course, this did not happen without initial difficulties. Career and regular soldiers from the “old” Bundeswehr and officers and non-commissioned officers taken over from the NVA initially regarded each other with skepticism.

The stationing of draftees from the new states on bases in the old federal states was experienced by many as an unnecessary hardship. The erstwhile NVA was a “socialist type army” that stood under the firm directive of the SED. In the eyes of many East German citizens, the former NVA was a privileged organization of the former GDR regime.

Implementing the principle of inner leadership on military bases in the new federal states proved to be a challenge.

In the end, though, mutual reservations quickly dissipated in the day-to-day running of the military.

Starting as early as January 1991, citizens of the new federal states who were fulfilling their basic military

service were predominantly sent to Western units for their three-month basic training, since the basic prerequisites for this did not yet exist in the Eastern units. Afterwards, they returned to deployment close to home. This also presented a challenge to the leadership capacity of all superior officers from East and West; for those former NVA members who were in training, it was also an incentive to continue their education. The joint tackling of difficulties had an integrative effect. Moreover, the coming-together of young people from both parts of Germany was influenced in a positive way. This experience has been built upon: since July 1992, the “Reciprocal Call-Up” directive has provided for draftees to be called to serve in units on the other side of the former “inner-German border.”

On the road to the “Army of Unity,” the Bundeswehr had taken on about 6,000 officers and around 11,200 non-commissioned officers from the former NVA as short-term soldiers for a two-year period after they had applied. At the end of the two years, the Bundeswehr, provided an application had been submitted, absorbed 3,000 officers and 7,600 non-commissioned officers from the former NVA as professional soldiers. They first had to undergo selection procedures for continuing employment in the public sector. In Leipzig on October 2, 1992, then-Minister of Defense Volker Rühle commissioned the first twenty former NVA soldiers as professional Bundeswehr soldiers.

Source: *Armee der Einheit, 1990-2000*, published by the Federal Ministry of Defense. Bonn, 2000, pp. 14-15.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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