

The NVA and the Bundeswehr (June 27, 1986)

Abstract

It is 1986 and Theo Sommer is the first West German journalist to officially visit one of the barracks of the National People's Army (NVA) in the GDR. His reflections tend to take the form of comparisons between the NVA and the West German Bundeswehr. Official propaganda combines with questions about how East and West German soldiers would actually react in the event of a military confrontation.

Source

A Visit with the People's Army

Would Germans shoot at Germans?

The jeep of the National People's Army is waiting at the rain-soaked highway exit Lehnitz-Oranienburg, fifty kilometers north of Berlin. A strapping young officer steps forward as a guide to the barracks of the Rudolf Gypfner regiment. The quarters are fairly new and appear polished to a shine. The parking lot right behind the barrack gates is empty. There is no sign of activity; that seems to be going on somewhere else.

Our convoy stops in front of the club building of the Lehnitz artillery regiment. Five colonels and lieutenant colonels welcome me with friendly diffidence; a feeling that I certainly share. They know that I was once the head of the Planning Staff in the Federal Ministry of Defense; I know that I am the first West German journalist the People's Army has allowed in with full official approval. The gentlemen introduce themselves before we go up to the memorabilia room: Deputy Division Commander; Party Secretary; Head of the Political Section; a gray-haired old warhorse, who has been part of it from the start—for thirty years. Colonel Jochen Michel, the spokesman of the Ministry of Defense, has also come. He has a secretary with him, who records the conversation in shorthand. The name of the Regimental Commander, a slender, thoughtful type, is Aré-Lallement.

Were it not for the light-gray uniform shirts, the epaulettes of the *Wehrmacht*, which have become very alien to us West Germans, and the unfamiliar medals and badges of honor, I could have easily imagined I was at the *Bundeswehr* in Neumünster or Sigmaringen. At any rate, I recognized all of them: the rock-hard warhorse, the desk officer, the intellectual, the person responsible for leadership development, sorry: for the political section. The military is the military everywhere, and soldiers are soldiers. And memorabilia rooms are memorabilia rooms. Flags and pennants; models of weapons and military equipment; display cases with trophies, mementos, certificates, photos of maneuvers and allies.

Except that in the case of the regiment in Lehnitz, the allies are different ones: not Americans, but Soviets, not a Belgian brigade, but the Warsaw artillery regiment. And, of course, a different tradition is cultivated. Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, to be sure, but otherwise nothing of Prussia's glory, nothing from the time of the *Reichswehr*, and most definitely nothing from Hitler's *Wehrmacht*. Medals from the Second World War: "We've never worn those," says Lieutenant Colonel Hill, the man of the first hour. "Not even without the swastika?"—"Never!"

In front of Regimental Commander Aré-Lallement, between the coffee service and the cookie plate, are notes on the fostering of tradition within the National People's Army. "It is incorporated into all of our educational work," he says. "It serves as motivation regarding the class mission of our army; it is the cultivation of the tradition of struggle against fascism and war. The swearing in of our young soldiers

takes place every six months at the national memorial site of Sachsenhausen [former site of a concentration camp], with great participation from the population. The remembrance of the fact that a hundred thousand people were murdered there by the Fascists makes many a member of the army grip his weapon more firmly. The swearing-in ceremony illustrates the NVA's progressive mission."

In the GDR they usually say *Zielstellung* [goal assignment] when we say *Zielsetzung* ["goal setting"]. I ask myself whether this has semantic meaning: you *set* your goals yourself, but they are *assigned* to you, therein lies the difference between self-realization and external control.

[...]

Aré-Lallement, two gold stars on his braided epaulettes, his expression serious and a little strained, says: "As part of our advancement of tradition, it is generally one of our goals to keep alive the memory of people's suffering." An officer of the Bundeswehr could put it the same way. "Bearing arms so that it will not happen again is our most important mission." He explains who Rudolf Gyptner was, the person after whom the regiment has been named since March 1, 1967: the son of a German Old Communist [long-standing Communist party member], resistance fighter, killed at age twenty-one as a partisan in Poland's forests. "We honor our revolutionary role model in meetings and by organizing a Rudolf-Gyptner memorial run every year."

The People's Army is an alliance army—like the Bundeswehr. "All of the training for the general staff takes place in the Soviet Union," I am told as an aside. The NVA does a lot of exercises with its allies. One of the gentlemen adds: "The pride I feel when I see the young people during exercises and competitions with our partners-in-arms fills my heart and soul."

Contests and competitions play a big role in the daily routine of the NVA. "One company calls for a socialist competition. The performance of that company then becomes the benchmark." Scores are given for the political-moral condition, the level of training, athletic achievements, the "completion of soldiers' commendations," the number of marksmanship badges. "The point is to fortify the military fighting collective. The cause is promoted intellectually and materially." In plain German: the soldier gets something out of it. A classification badge for the "outstanding mastery of fighting technique" is rewarded with an additional 300 to 500 Mark, not only with a piece of tinsel for the buckle of the medal.

By now the rain has stopped. We drive out to the shooting range. A watery mist hovers over the expansive ground: brown heath, bordered by pines typical of the march[1] landscape. The location has tradition, like many in the GDR. Jüterbog, Nauen, Strausberg, Zossen—the military has always been at home around Berlin. An hour's drive further north lies Eggesin, where many of the 174,000 People's Army soldiers go through their basic training when they go to serve "the flag" for eighteen months (as their West German counterparts serve "the Bund [short for Bundeswehr]." A woman from Berlin whose son had been there confides in me that "grave of my youth" is what young people call the military training ground in Western Pomerania. "Not as bad as all that," comments deputy division commander in Lehnitz with a gentle smile.

What goes on at the shooting range is not much different from the Bundeswehr. "Score with the first shot" is the motto. There's a poster right up front: "High combat readiness—the product of our work." For a long time, Bundeswehr advertisements used to say: "We produce security."

[...]

A conversation on the sidelines. "Do your soldiers complain about boring drudgery [*Gammeldienst*]?"—"That's not how they put it, but the sentiment is familiar. They much prefer things going bang than having to clean equipment."

What do they think of the Bundeswehr? “You know,” says Lieutenant Colonel Aré-Lallement, “when I see the photo of a Bundeswehr soldier, I always ask myself: ‘What is going on under that helmet?’”—“You know,” I say, “that’s the same question our officers ask themselves when they see the photo of a soldier of the National People’s Army. . .”

The exercise is over. The gunners put on fatigues. Two dozen gather in front of mountains of sandwiches in the nearby office building for a discussion with the West German journalist—soldiers, privates, sergeants, the battery commander, all of them good types: brisk, lively, slim, well-proportioned faces. The gentlemen from the staff are also present.

“What is national about the National People’s Army?”

“We see ourselves as part of the nation,” says one of them.

“They try to make us believe that the German nation is a single whole,” the battery commander adds. “I personally don’t believe that. Other people have cut that cord. We have a different culture, different production conditions. Our people have a completely different view of life.”

“Do you also,” I inquire, “discuss the question that is often discussed within the Bundeswehr: if worst comes to worst, would Germans shoot at Germans?”

The answer is provided by one of the staff officers: “The Federal Republic is a partner in NATO, we are allies in the Warsaw Pact. In a war, two different states, two different social systems confront each other. Our job is to prevent a war, and, should there be one nevertheless, to end it as quickly as possible. If the Bundeswehr were to engage in an intervention, we would of course take up arms.”

A private speaks up: “In the FRG they are still pulling members of the FDJ [Free German Youth, the communist youth organization] off of trains. Borders are questioned—as was done at the meeting of Silesians.^[2] What interests are Bundeswehr soldiers fighting for?”

A colonel follows up: “What concerns our comrades time and again”—in the People’s Army, too, they call one another comrade—“is this: the Federal Republic of Germany has a special role within NATO. But it leads the way when it comes to chemical weapons. It professes that war must no longer arise from German soil, but it does not take any practical steps.”

The old warhorse adds to the list of complaints: the Federal Republic agreed unconditionally to the SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative]; it supported American state terrorism against Libya; because of Chernobyl it unleashed a mass psychosis on flimsy grounds; it’s been a long time since there were such brazen “meetings of revanchists” as took place in Munich and Essen; why does the federal government not tell the Americans: stop nuclear weapons testing. Our people don’t understand.

I try to counter: so far SDI is merely a research project; we did not applaud the bombs dropped on Libya, on the contrary; the meetings of the *Landsmannschaften* [Associations of Ethnic Germans] are essentially, well: meetings about the old country, where old acquaintances come together to share a drink; finally, the fears about Chernobyl are surely attributable to Soviet information policy, not to the West German government—in any case, why would it stoke nuclear fears when it is in favor of nuclear energy?

[...]

On the way to the car, the deputy division commander wants to know our position on Erich Honecker’s Gera Demands. Then we talk about images of the enemy, and I ask about “teaching hatred,” as it is practiced in the People’s Army. “There is no teaching of hatred,” I am lectured.

Lieutenant Colonel Aré-Lallement returns once more to the question of whether Germans would shoot at Germans: “We have nothing against the individual person in the FRG. But the moment he takes up arms, he becomes the enemy, regardless of whether he is my uncle or not. If I don’t shoot at him, he’ll shoot at my comrade-in-arms next to me. . .”

This is the official answer that is also given—with a similar formulation, albeit in reverse—by the Bundeswehr. In the car on the way back from Lehnitz to Berlin, immersed in the contemplation of two classification insignia and a silver marksmanship badge, which the deputy division commander presented to me as we parted, I ask myself whether this official answer really describes what would in fact happen in the worst case scenario.

Nobody can be entirely sure about this—neither here nor there.

NOTES

[1] Lehnitz is located in the March Brandenburg—eds.

[2] People who were expelled after World War II when Silesia became part of Poland; many settled in the Federal Republic—eds.

Source: Theo Sommer, “Besuch bei der Volksarmee. Würden Deutsche auf Deutsche schießen?“, *Die Zeit*, Nr. 27/1986. © Die Zeit. Republished with permission. Available online at: <https://www.zeit.de/1986/27/besuch-bei-der-volksarmee>

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: The NVA and the Bundeswehr (June 27, 1986), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-5050>> [April 26, 2024].